

Chapter 816

Messengers Don't Have Hearts

Garth and Jameela were standing atop a hill of red desert rock. Their vast forces spread out on the plateau they were overlooking.

"So, the messengers want this soul forge, whatever that is," Garth said.

"According to the Magic Society researchers, yes," Jameela said. "And it seems that Asano is the biggest threat to that objective. He also has the ability to claim it."

"Do we?"

"I don't believe so. We could only acquire it with the help of the messengers, and they will not hand it over. To return to their leadership without it is likely worse than dying down here. I don't believe we could use it anyway. The transformation zone itself, once reunited with reality, remains the prize."

"Then we can let them have it, so long as the zone itself still goes to us."

"I would counsel caution. We are unlikely to understand any magic they use to that end."

"Yes. And promises don't always need to be kept."

Garth turned to look off at the distant mountain where the messengers were lairing. Three of them were flying in their direction. The two priests waited and watched until the messengers were floating in the air in front of them. The one Garth had spoken with before, Boris Ket Lundi, was flanked by the other two.

"I sensed the death of the rest of your other gold-rankers," Garth said. More accurately, he'd sensed the aura dome into which they'd been led one by one, and then their dead bodies when the dome dropped.

"Neither of us are fools," Boris said. "We can make a deal to stay out of your fight with the adventurers, but you would doubtless expect us to turn on you when you were weakened. Now we lack the strength. However many silver-rankers we have, and whatever the cost of bringing low your enemy, we no longer have the strength to turn on you."

"You expect me to believe you gutted most of your gold-rank strength as a show of trust?" Garth asked.

"Naturally not," Boris said. "I chose the way that served my own ends as well. But the affairs of my people are not your business. How the results affect you are your business."

"Handing over your territories, and the messengers that come with them, would make for a better show of trust."

“Trust goes both ways, High Priest. If we slaughter our strongest warriors and hand over the territories, that leaves you with no incentive to accede to our modest requests. Jason Asano must not survive the battle.”

“Killing Asano falls within our interests as well, I can assure you.”

“I want more than assurances, High Priest. I want details.”

“You are not in a position to negotiate,” Jameela said.

Boris did not shift his blank expression but he glanced at Jameela briefly before turning back to Garth. Garth nodded his acknowledgement.

“You are not in a position to be a threat,” Garth said, “but you could be a bother.”

“We could be more than a bother,” Boris said. “I am confident that we can escape your camp.”

“Is that so?”

“Your avatar is powerful, but it is neither close nor fast. Not enough to stop the three of us, or our forces if they start fleeing now. We chose you because our desire for Asano’s death makes for the less uneasy alliance. If you prove that assessment wrong, you will find us on the other side of the upcoming battle.”

“You’re bluffing,” Jameela said. “You want Asano dead and he knows it.”

“And I know Asano. The last time he was in a transformation zone, he allied with the man who killed his brother and lover. He is not afraid to work with his foes.”

“And what fate befell this foe of Asano’s in that space?” Garth asked.

“Jason Asano, silver-rank at the time, was pulled into that transformation zone along with a slate of his gold-rank enemies. When the space returned to reality, two people escaped intact. One was Asano, the zone now in his possession. The other was a gold-rank vampire that went on to lead the vampires of that world in a war for domination. But despite that seeming fearlessness, she hid after leaving the transformation zone. She did not dare show her face again until Asano had left that universe entirely.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” Garth said. “You could have just said that Asano’s enemy died inside. Instead, you told me that story. Why?”

“I said that two people escaped that transformation zone intact. There was another, but I would not call him intact nor his departure an escape. Asano’s enemy did die, yes, but the vampire trapped his soul in a blood clone that now serves her as a slave.”

“It doesn’t sound like allying with Asano while still being his enemy is likely to turn out well for you.”

“Thus, I came to you first. But if you truly think we have no position to negotiate from...”

“You do,” Garth said, “but walking away from us complicates things for you more than you are suggesting, messenger.”

Boris snorted a smirking laugh.

“And how is that, priest?”

“Asano wants the soul forge while we are willing to let you have it.”

The smirk dropped from Boris’ face.

“How did... do you even understand what it is you’re talking about?” Boris asked

“There is a way for you to still take it while we keep the territory?”

“What? Oh, yes, that’s not an issue,” Boris said. His expression made plain that he was hastily reorganising things in his mind. “That’s just a matter of the right ritual as you consolidate the transformation zone with reality. The only challenge there is convincing you to let us set off some magic I guarantee you won’t understand while the transformation zone goes through the transition.”

“Our god’s avatar is the seat of our territorial power,” Garth said. “Undeath instilled it with the ability to claim the zone. You don’t have close to the power to interfere with that. You will need to excise this soul forge of yours while being very careful not to interfere with the god’s work. If your imprecision costs you because our god puts a halt to your magic, we will consider that your failure, not a violation of our deal.”

Boris looked troubled as he considered Garth’s words.

“Allow me to discuss this before giving you an answer,” he said.

“Be quick,” Garth said. “Your leverage is as lacking as my patience.”

Boris scowled but held his tongue. The three messengers floated away and a shimmering dome appeared around them. Inside the dome, Boris grinned.

“This is going great!”

“How so?” Fiola asked.

“He must have found out about the soul forge from someone they captured and interrogated.”

“I share Fiola Min Kath’s confusion,” Mahk said. “A ritual to extract the soul forge while this dimensional realm is being reinserted into reality would take immense research by astral magic experts.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Boris said. “The priest is lying about letting it happen anyway. He definitely doesn’t believe it’s as easy as I made it out to be. We’re in the same position we were in the first place, making bets on who can betray the other one more effectively. He just thinks he’s found some extra leverage.”

“I’m not sure I understand the plan,” Fiola said.

“Of course you don’t,” Boris said. “I didn’t tell you all of it. Now, it’s about time we went back out there. Remember to look stern.”

The dome dropped and the three messengers floated back to Garth.

“We can accept your terms,” Boris said, “so long as you make absolutely certain that Asano is dead. If he interferes in the ritual and causes your god to foul it, that *will* be a violation of our deal.”

“Asano will die,” Garth said.

“How?” Boris asked.

“That is our concern.”

“Not good enough. I’ll give you one of my silver-rank messengers. You can take for yourself their power to isolate themselves with an enemy in a dimensional space. Isolate Asano from his allies and kill him yourself.”

“Take their power?” Garth asked.

“I have neither the time nor the interest for playing games with you, priest. I know what you can do because I know what you are.”

The red lights in the eye sockets of Garth’s skull face flared brightly.

“Oh, calm down,” Boris said. “I’m an ancient wanderer of the cosmos; you think you’re my first zemravore?”

Garth’s eyes dimmed, Jameela’s gaze panning between Boris and Garth. Boris and Garth stared at one another in silence for a long moment.

“Very well,” Garth said. “I have heard of the duelling powers possessed by many messengers. Just make sure the messenger you bring me has one. This plan will suffice.”

“No,” Boris said. “It won’t. You don’t know Asano. Don’t underestimate him because he’s silver-rank. He’s elusive, dwelling in shadows and hiding his aura even from gold-rankers. And he’s died before. You have to kill him, then keep killing him until it sticks. Take your undead with you. The ones you animated personally are linked to you like familiars.”

“Don’t lecture a high priest of Undeath on how raising the dead works, messenger.”

Boris bowed his head in acknowledgment.

“Foolish of me, in hindsight,” he said. “My point is that your undead are connected to you, and will therefore be able to join you into the sealed space. Take an army of them and don’t give Asano anywhere to hide. Dig out every crevice and cut into every shadow. He will only have so much area to work with in a sealed space. Deprive him of every place he might go to ground and drag him into the light. Only then can you make the difference in rank come into play.”

“You believe he can hide from my senses?”

“I know he can,” Boris said. “He’s hard to pin down; even catching him in an isolation power will be a trick, but that is the beginning of the fight, not the end. Victory will only come when he’s dead for good. Do not dismiss what I said about his resurrections. He’s been killed by the Builder’s first servant and even the Builder inhabiting a mortal vessel. It will take more than—”

“I’ve heard you,” Garth said. “Stop belabouring the point. Leave us now before you try my patience further. Go, and return only with your messenger sacrifice.”

Boris’ expression said he didn’t want to leave it at just that, but he turned and flew off. The other messengers followed and the two priests watched. When he was confident they were out of even gold-rank earshot, Garth spoke to Jameela.

“What do you think?”

“There is unquestionably something strange between the messengers and Asano,” Jameela said. “How close it adheres to what these messengers have presented is the question.”

“You interrogated the essence users about this adventurer and the messengers. Did you learn anything relevant to this question?”

“When the messengers invaded the elf city, they became obsessed with killing Asano. The researchers weren’t certain why.”

“That holds with what I know of messengers. They rarely care about any but their own kind as individuals. Those that do, they obsess over destroying. Usually for having affronted their dignity in some way, besmirching their precious sense of superiority.”

“Related to the fact that Asano can claim this soul forge of theirs?”

“That seems likely. I think we can at least believe that their desire for his death is true. They simply want us to do their work for them, and let the adventurers soften us up in the process.”

“Then they will wait for Asano’s death before betraying us.”

“Yes. I suspect their weakness is feigned. The group we have seen may just be a fraction of their true strength, with their true force gathered in the territory they still hold. The ones they killed here were probably political opponents of Boris Ket Lundi. He consolidated his strength while passing it off as a show of humility and trust. But there is no humility in a messenger.”

“How will you deal with them?”

“I won’t. However great they have deluded themselves into believing they are, our god has sent his power into this place. Whatever their schemes, the avatar is a wall no winged beast can fly over.”

Garth stared at the shadowy figure, standing alone before the full might of the undead army.

“We both have areas within our territories with environmental weapons,” Jason’s voice came from Shade’s body. “We’ll fight on neutral ground. A cleared but unclaimed territory.”

“Where?”

“There’s a forest made of stone adjacent to both of our territories. It hasn’t been cleared yet. I suggest that our demigod and your avatar do so. Supervised by a selection of gold-rankers on each side so we can be sure that neither of us attempts to ambush the other’s divine combatant.”

Garth’s skeletal face didn’t react, despite his surprise that the enemy had gotten that close. The territory in question had been scouted. The more complex the terrain, the greater the advantage of thinking fighters over the mindless undead that made up the bulk of Garth’s forces. The stone forest was acceptable. It was harder for the undead to navigate than empty desert, but some cover made it harder to wipe them out in swathes with wide-area magic. He suspected the enemy had chosen it knowing they would reject anything too disadvantageous to the undead.

“I am aware of the territory,” Garth said. “Our avatar will clear it alone.”

The response was a moment coming, Garth assuming Asano was consulting with his allies.

“That is acceptable,” Jason’s voice finally came. “Under the condition that it is observed from our side. If there is some hidden weapon in the territory, we cannot allow you to claim it.”

“Acceptable,” Garth echoed. “I will send the avatar in an hour. If your observers are not in place, that is your failing.”

Mahk carried the unconscious silver-rank messenger. They were trained to be obedient but also trained for loyalty to the astral kings. These had come into conflict upon discovering that their leaders were all now Unorthodoxy. The combination of being indoctrinated to obey and seeing what happened to those who didn’t made the bloodbath short. This was one of the rebellious ones, left alive for a grimmer purpose.

He delivered the messenger to the high priest of Undeath, uncertain of what would happen. The priest marched down the hill he always seemed to dwell on, going down the side opposite his own forces. Mahk didn't care if Garth wanted to keep his nature hidden from his priests and followed along, still carrying the silver-ranker.

Garth threw off the robes draped around his bizarre body, revealing a skeletal, hunchback form. Two extra legs and four extra arms, all wrapped around its body, had been bulking it out under the robes. The limbs unfurled, uncovering a rib cage containing four stony sockets held in place by bone struts, all where internal organs would be on a living thing. Inside each socket was a living, beating heart, held in place by bone spikes stabbed into them. Each side of the rib cage swung open like a door and the spikes retracted from one of the hearts. Garth reached in, plucked it out and tossed it aside like the crust of a stale sandwich.

At a gesture from Garth, Mahk approached with the unconscious messenger in his arms. Garth directed him to hold it up and Mahk did so, his hands slung under its arms. One of Garth's hands shot out, burying itself in the messenger's chest. A moment later, the messenger erupted into rainbow smoke, her body gone but for a beating heart, gripped in Garth's hand. Garth placed the heart in the empty socket and bone spikes stabbed into it.

"You can go," Garth told Mahk as his ribs closed and the limbs started curling around his body once more. Mahk floated in place with a confused expression, staring at Garth.

"What is it?" Garth asked, irritated.

"Messengers don't have hearts," Mahk said.

"I don't care."