

Chapter 814

Another Astral King

Mahk Den Kahla was an unhappy messenger. Ever since meeting Boris Ket Lundi, things had been spiralling out of control. Boris was dominant force, his arguments for Mahk handing over his territory compelling. And Mahk was not the last to be swayed, with other messengers they encountered having fallen into line as well. Not every gold-ranker was convinced by words, but those who survived challenging Boris ultimately accepted their subordination. Boris was not just an outstanding combatant but one well-versed in fighting other messengers.

Each individual step that brought them to their current situation had made sense. The options weren't always desirable, but they were acceptable, and Boris had a way of presenting them not just as the right choice, but as the only real choice. That was how they ended up where they were, every step the right one, yet leading down a path Mahk would never have chosen himself.

Seeking an alliance, Boris had led them right into the hands of the Undeath priests. Their massive army of undead blanketed the ground and the messengers they has awoken with their territories dotted the sky. Standing out most of all was the towering figure of Undeath's avatar, holding claim over the unliving's unified territories that the high priest of Undeath could not himself.

The messengers they had on hand were too few to handle the Undeath priests, at least until they spent themselves against the adventurers and their allies. But false alliances with the filthy unliving was not the messenger way. Power and dominance was their way and, through words or weapons, how Boris had managed to keep the other messengers in check. But having watched him closely, Mahk saw far too much that was odd about the man. Too much that was unlike a messenger.

Boris was off alone, negotiating with the Undeath high priest. Mahk and the rest of the messengers were settled high on a mountain, some way from the plateau holding the Undeath forces. Most of the territory was an endless span of red rock, sand and dust. The upper reaches of the mountain held the only greenery, the cooler air of altitude allowing the growth of some sparse woodland. The desert heat was not harmful to them, but that did not make it pleasant.

The messengers had no real place for themselves, with no lesser races to construct abodes. They rested on the lightly wooded mountainside, finding what limited comfort they could. Mahk hovered in the air above the trees, waiting for Boris to return from negotiating

with the Undeath high priest. He could see the plateau in the distance where the unliving forces were gathered. The undead blanketed the ground while messengers taken by claiming territory dotted the sky. What held his attention most was the avatar; a beacon of power, radiating corruption.

It left Mahk unsettled, his own corruption behind him but not forgotten. He only remembered his time serving the strange tree as dream-like scraps of memory, lurking in his mind like hidden traitors.

When Boris came flying through the air, Mahk flew out to meet him. Boris slowed and stopped, unhurried in his movements.

“We need to speak, Boris,” Mahk demanded. Boris didn’t react to the challenge in his tone, his amused smile irking Mahk.

“Yes, Mahk, we do. Are we going to talk floating here in the air, or can we find somewhere to sit down.”

“This is exactly what I want to talk about. Sit down? We are superior beings, Boris. We float above the ground to show our lessers that we don’t just stand taller than them but stand above them entirely. We are their sky, and when we choose sit, we sit on thrones.”

“You think I lack the dignity of a messenger,” Boris said.

“You walk on the ground. You slouch. You lounge.”

“Then stop me,” Boris said, the suspect lightness of his tone a promise of danger. “If you want to stand above me, Mahk, then cut me down. Take my place.”

Mahk scowled.

“We both know I cannot,” he said.

“Then perhaps you need to revise what your concept of standing above is, Mahk. You can talk about dignity all you like, but what does prattling on about honour or principle sound like when you lack the power to enforce it?”

Mahk pressed his lips together tightly, as if to trap his next words, but they escaped nonetheless.

“A servant race,” he said through gritted teeth. “It sounds like a servant race.”

“Yes,” Boris said. “Now, let’s go find somewhere to sit down.”

High Priest Garth stood on a hill atop a rocky desert plateau. A bloody red sunset pooled across the sky, blue fading into darkness as if the day had been stabbed to death. Garth’s grin was permanent as his head was a skull with only pinpricks of red light for eyes. His robe draped over a body clearly not human in shape, a sharp hump and various odd protrusions tenting the fabric in odd places.

Garth looked over his forces, gathered on the plateau. The ground was almost impossible to see, blanketed in the undead. The sky was dotted with messengers, not as thick as the undead but still a considerable force. Less pleasing was the lack of priests, the few dozen remaining representing less than half the original number.

Some had doubtless fallen victim to the transformation zone itself, or had a run-in with messengers or adventurers. The forces of the living had shifted from claiming territory to hunting them, and Garth wanted to know why. They weren't trying to snatch territory but priests, taking prisoners in a series of hit-and-run attacks. Given that he was unlikely to get an answer otherwise, Garth had decided he would wring it from their throats himself. Building up new undead was getting hard now that the anomalies were so strong, so the time to remove their enemies had come.

The biggest piece of the puzzle was now in place, the avatar of Undeath looming over their forces. It held control over their territories now, Garth himself having been pushed to the limit. His unusual nature had allowed him to hold more territories than most, and recover faster from their loss. The avatar controlled them now and Garth controlled the avatar, until such time as he could return it to Undeath.

When the battle came, the avatar would tie up the demigod while their massive horde handled the rest. Once that was done, the horde would turn on the demigod as well, breaking the stalemate between the two divine entities.

Aside from the empowered leonid, only one of their foes was a concern: whoever had the power to weaken their undead forces as a whole. The ghost fire they spread wasn't as powerful as that of Death's miracle, but clearly they were of a kind. There was also this issue of their aura suppressing the magic of undeath. That would have to be dealt with or their numerical advantage would have little impact.

Jameela strode up the hill towards Garth, graceful on her long legs. She was wearing an elegant combat robe and heavy boots, red with dust. Garth was again struck by the longing she engendered in him, despite his unliving body. The little living tissue he possessed should not be enough for such feelings. He would never act upon them, of course, not allowing himself such a lack of discipline. There was also the issue of his body being as ill-equipped to slake such urges as it should have been to feel them at all.

"You have answers?" he demanded as she crested the hill.

"It's Jason Asano," she said, moving to stand beside him.

"The same one claiming their territories?"

"Yes."

"Interesting; you are not the first to bring his name up today. You're sure?"

"I captured some of the brighthearts who were around him when he enacted Death's miracle, as well as a pair of essence users. Asano is the one."

"Essence users? Adventurers?"

"Magic Society researchers. I now have answers on what adventurers were doing underground. I brought them all in alive, in case you want to question them yourself before I kill and animate them."

"No, I trust your ability to make them speak the truth."

"Then we need to target Asano during the battle. Once we eliminate him, not only will they lose their power to weaken our undead but they will lose their territories. It won't cost them power immediately, but it will hurt their morale."

Garth nodded.

"He's silver-rank, which makes him vulnerable, but we need to be careful in our approach. There is a reason that Death granted him a miracle. That he's the one claiming territories when they have the demigod. Undeath himself saw fit to warn me about Asano, which says enough. He is not to be underestimated, and the enemy will protect him with care."

"Perhaps," Jameela said. "My information is that he involves himself in battles more than the people around him would like. His aura will diminish the power of our undead, but he needs to use his powers directly to spread the ghost fire."

"Perhaps we dilute the battlefield. Strike from multiple points; spread our forces over a wider area than a silver-rank aura can cover."

"Relying on such a strategy might not be best," Jameela suggested. "I extracted as much information I could about Asano from the prisoners. They claim that his aura is like a gold-ranker, both in strength and coverage."

"That sounds unlikely. How hard did you press them on this topic?"

"Hard. The Magic Society researchers were highly convinced of this information's authenticity. They claim Asano has been training under Amos Pensinata."

Garth jerked his head, turning his gaze from the forces arrayed below them to his subordinate priestess.

"Pensinata? Is he here, in this place?"

"Yes. I have a full list of names, but Pensinata aside, the highlights are Gabrielle and Arabelle Remore, along with their old team member, Emir Bahadir."

"The treasure hunter? Those are Vitesse adventurers. What are they doing here?"

"They are allies of Asano. The son of the Remores is on his team."

A dissatisfied sound passed through Garth's skeletal mouth.

“No wonder they did so much damage with so few gold-rankers if that is the calibre of them.”

“The high priestess of the Healer from Yaresh is also amongst them.”

“Who is this Asano that he can rally such people around him? Adventurers from the other side of the world. Even the god of death is paying him attention?”

“According to the researchers, Asano is the reason the Builder left this world before the monster surge was over.”

Garth didn't have the eyelids to make his eyes go wide, but the red lights in the sockets of his skull shone a little brighter for a moment.

“The more I learn,” Garth said, “the more this man troubles me.”

“How will you deal with him?” Jameela asked.

“While you were off finding the name of our enemy,” Garth said, “I was making new allies.”

“The messengers?”

“Yes. They know that they lack the power to overcome either us or the adventurers and their allies. And they claim Asano is an existing enemy to them. They have offered their assistance so long as they are allowed to leave the transformation zone alive and Asano is not.”

“They will attempt to play us off against the forces of the living and swoop in at the end.”

“Yes. Tell me what you got from the researchers about what the messengers are doing here.”

Boris was sitting on a mossy rock, under a tree that shaded him from the glaring sun above. He used his aura to create a privacy screen, a shimmering dome covering himself and Mahk. The other messenger had consented to sit, but was floating in the air, cross-legged.

“You are a strange messenger, Boris.”

“Of course I am. To be ordinary violates the core philosophy of our culture. Being like every other messenger is to be mundane.”

“We are taught to obey.”

“Yeah. Funny, that. Lot's of ‘you are the greatest beings in the cosmos, now shut up and do what you're told.’ You can't have reached gold-rank without spotting the contradictions.”

“I’ve seen you do this enough times to recognise it, Boris Ket Lundi. You are moving the discussion from you to me, but this is about you. Your eccentricities are more than just some attempt to stand out amongst our kind. Your strength does that enough that you have no need for such foolishness. You aren’t one of us, are you? You’re part of the Unorthodoxy.”

“Yes,” Boris admitted casually. Mahk uncrossed his legs and floated higher into the air.

“You lied to me,” Mahk said.

“I’ve never lied to you, Mahk. I haven’t always told the truth, but you’ve never heard me tell a lie.”

“That doesn’t matter. What matters is that you are the enemy. The ultimate enemy.”

“Do you really believe that? Mahk? You’re gold-rank. Surely you’ve seen through at least some of the indoctrination they put you. I never lied to you, but will you lie to me and say you’ve never had doubts about what was drilled into your mind?”

“Don’t try that with me, Boris Ket Lundi. We quash doubts because they will cost us everything. The astral king—”

“Can’t get you here!” Boris cut him off. “For your entire life, Mahk Den Kahla, there has been a sword dangling over your head. It’s been waiting to strike should you even think the wrong way. But, for now, the sword is gone. For the first time in your life, you are genuinely free. Use this to think, to really think, the way you’ve never been allowed.”

“You won’t corrupt me.”

“You’ve already been corrupted. You think Vesta Carmis Zell will take you back? After not only failing, but failing so spectacularly that the prize you were meant to deliver to her turned you into a mindless slave? One tainted by base power?”

“I am cleansed.”

“By the actions of Jason Asano, which is enough by itself that she will never trust you again, soul brand or not. If you go back, you won’t be welcomed into the fold. You’ll be made an example of.”

“You don’t know that.”

Boris let out a sigh.

“I do, Mahk,” he said softly. “And so do you. It’s just a matter of whether you’ll admit it to yourself before the ignorance kills you.”

“You said you didn’t lie to me, but Vesta Carmis Zell would never accept a member of the Unorthodoxy.”

“She didn’t. She bargained for the services of messengers with elemental powers and didn’t much care where they came from. Do you have any idea how many astral kings are outside the Council of Kings? The council doesn’t. Astral kings are older than universes and never die. She has no idea that I’m Unorthodoxy.”

“But if I tell her about you, it will lead back to a major nest of enemies.”

“Yes,” Boris said and Mahk narrowed his eyes.

“You’re not trusting me. You’re telling me to switch sides or you’ll kill me for my silence.”

“Yes. The reality is, you won’t get to tell her about me, Mahk. You still have her brand on your soul, and she’ll use it to scour your mind the moment you are back in her grasp. She’ll know everything and credit you with nothing. She’ll kill you for having had this conversation.”

“Then you might as well kill me now. There is no escaping the brand.”

“No,” Boris agreed. “Not without another astral king.”