

Chapter 779

Put Up or Shut Up

The first major breach of the wall was on the fifth floor. It began as a minor breach, the wall blasting out in a cloud of stone dust and rubble. Gary's team was the first to respond, with Gary once more moving in to block the gap. That was when he saw one of the creatures responsible for the explosions, little more than a glowing blob on four legs. He threw his hammer, trying to kill the thing before it marched into the hole, but something slammed into place to block his attack. A more powerful undead, something like a jet-black mantis with quick, jerking movements and arms ending in chitinous shields. If not for the aura it emitted, it would be hard to tell it was undead.

Gary's hammer flew back to his hand as the mantis creature moved forward, protecting the thing behind it. Gary hunkered behind his own shield as he backed off, knowing what was coming. He yelled at his support team to run.

The blast destroyed the shield mantis creature. Ironically, this also shielded Gary and his golem from the full blast, although they were still both thrown out from the wall to drop five storeys down. The wall itself was not so shielded and had already been weakened by the blast that caused the first breach. The floor above collapsed, taking that level's barricades with it and leaving a two-storey hole for the undead to pour through. They had to climb over the mound of rubble that had dropped from above, but that was barely an impediment.

Gary and his heavy armour left spiderweb cracks in the ground when he landed in a crouch. He slung his massive sledge-like weapon, Gary's Medium Hammer, over his back. The magical bandolier he wore over his conjured armour held it conveniently in place. He then plucked a tiny hammer that was dangling from his belt, the handle barely long enough for his hand to grip. Normally he would keep it in his dimensional pouch, but they were still unreliable and he'd had a feeling he'd need it.

Gary's strength rivalled gold-rank, so he didn't just stand up from a crouch but launched himself straight up into the air, armour and all. He reached the level of the hole he'd been tossed from, even a little higher, and threw the tiny hammer in his hand, Gary's Big Hammer. The hammer grew comically in size as it flew, landing in the hole and grinding the undead crawling through into paste. The hammer wasn't done growing as it landed, expanding to fill the entire gap, even cracking some of the stone wall around it.

Gary landed on a flying stone platform flown under him by one of the gold-rank brightheart guards.

“That’s quite a weapon, Mr Xandier.”

Gary took his medium hammer from his back.

“Bloody expensive, though, and it’s a one-use item unless you find a giant looking for a new hammer. It cost more than this one,” he said, gesturing with the hammer in his hand.

“Then we thank you for the expenditure. We can’t afford a lot of breaches like that.”

They both surveyed the wall from the air, minor breaches happening all over.

“I don’t know how long we can hold this,” Gary said. “I hope Clive is working fast.”

Clive was working fast. There were nine platforms set up around the tree, all of which needed to have individual ritual circles. Each circle had to operate not only in response to the environment but to each other.

Clive, as it turned out, was one of the greatest minds on Pallimustus when it came to the understanding of magical theory. While astral magic was his speciality, there were a handful of other fields in which he was well versed. That did not make him the same as a specialist in those fields, however. Without the people around him, their endeavour would have failed already.

Like almost everyone, Farrah was not the equal of Clive in magical theory. Even so, she was still a respected expert in her field of array magic. Array magic wasn’t a flashy field, and every speciality had at least a fundamental grasp of it. It was only when delving into the more nuanced aspects that being an actual specialist mattered. Clive’s fundamental understanding of array magic was exceptional, but what they needed now went far beyond the fundamentals.

It had swiftly become evident how the original attempt by the messengers to transmute the natural array failed. The complexity of the magic involved boggled even Clive’s mind. Not only was the natural array a paradigm of magic with which he was too unfamiliar, but the interplay between the array and the environment was too much for him to actively track while conducting multiple interlocking rituals.

The interactivity of multiple arrays was an aspect of array magic well outside the fundamentals. Understanding the nuances took too much study for anyone but array specialists, many of whom focused on just that aspect of it. As for natural arrays, Farrah’s study of the grid on Earth made her one of the few true experts on Pallimustus.

Carlos Quilido was proving a surprisingly useful asset in decoding how the natural array’s magic had been twisted by the efforts of the messengers. With the tree as a reference, the expert in magical corruption helped Farrah work backwards from what the

natural array was doing now versus what it should be doing, had the messengers not made their ill-fated attempt to turn it into a soul forge.

Clive was in charge of all the magical theorists currently scrambling to test and retest the ambient magic and set up the foundations of the ritual diagrams they were slowly assembling. He was the foreman on the worksite, overseeing the activity according to the design given to him. Farrah was the architect from which the design originated.

Belinda was of more direct assistance than Clive. Her unconventional training was a mixture of self-teaching, assisting Clive and practical application under often adverse and usually illegal conditions. When it came to speciality knowledge or executing known magic with precision and efficiency, she fell short of Farrah and Clive. When it came to quick and dirty solutions to problems cropping up with improvised magic, she left both of them in the dust.

“That is a wildly inefficient magic conduit,” Clive pointed out as he observed Belinda adding to one of the ritual circles.

“The problem isn’t efficiency,” Belinda told him. “We’ve got magic shooting out of our arses in here. The problem is getting that magic to work for us without blowing up or turning us all into elemental mind slaves like these messengers.”

Farrah wandered over to examine Belinda’s work.

“She’s right,” Farrah told Clive. “What she’s doing here exchanges the magic without causing interference with the source or destination points.”

Clive frowned, not annoyed at being wrong but with curiosity.

“Can you make notes on what you’re doing for me to look at later?”

“No, she can’t!” Farrah told him. “We’re trying to go fast, remember?”

Clive’s face scrunched in a reluctant grimace.

“Fine,” he acceded.

“Can you check in with Jason on how they’re going with the other device?” Farrah asked him. Clive’s expression was back to business at the reminder.

“Yeah,” he said. “None of this means anything if they don’t get it done at the other end.”

“Destruction tricked the surface messengers as well,” Boris explained as he crawled around on the floor, drawing out a ritual circle with the messenger device at its centre. It was situated in a room directly over that containing the echo array in the citadel. Assisting and checking on him was Ramona, the gold-rank ritualist from team Moon’s Edge.

As they worked, Boris was explaining more about his involvement in their current circumstances. His audience was Marla, the brightheart commander, and Jason via Shade.

“Jes Fin Kaal believed that Destruction wanted a massive explosion after the messengers successfully claimed the soul forge,” Boris explained. “That was the deal. Of course, that's not how it was going to work, since all the destructive power would be absorbed into the forge itself. Kaal thought she was playing the god, but she was the one getting played. She never realised whose priests she granted access to the messenger-controlled tunnel. I was expecting to find Destruction priests waiting for us, not Undeath ones. We ran, and that's where Gabriel and his sexy wife came in.”

“You’re already on thin ice,” Jason’s voice came from Shade’s body. “You will treat Arabelle Remore with respect, whether she is present or not.”

“You’re not exactly famous for treating people with respect yourself,” Boris pointed out.

“You’re right. Do you know what I am famous for?”

Boris froze for a moment before resuming his work.

“Nothing but respect for Mrs Remore,” he said. “Almost done, by the way.”

Boris and Ramona drew out the final chalk lines to complete the diagram, then placed materials in various locations within it. A clay bowl full of powder, small piles of quintessence gems and several stacks of spirit coins. After they were done, Boris turned to Shade.

“We can go on your word,” he said. “The device on this end is ready for activation.”

“Thank you,” Jason said.

“Asano,” Marla said. “The citadel chamber won’t stand much longer. The wall is already breached in a dozen places and we can’t plug holes as fast as they’re appearing. More and more of our forces are being pulled from plugging holes to dealing with the undead that have already made it through.”

“How long can you hold?” Jason asked.

“Could be an hour or two. Could be a minute or two. One or two major breaches will see us overrun. Two hours is our limit, though. After that, the encroaching undeath zone will expand to the wall and they’ll have us.”

“We’ll be as fast as we can,” Jason told her.

In the natural array chamber, Jason opened his eyes. He looked for Clive and spotted him already heading their way, sitting on Onslow who was currently the size of a dining table.

“How is the preparation on the other side?” Clive asked.

“They’re ready. Now they need us to be before they get overrun. They’re a lot closer to losing the echo array than I’d like. “How long on our end?”

“Once we’ve calibrated for the incredibly complex and constantly shifting elemental energy that itself is being pressured by the encroaching undeath energy? Less than a minute.”

“And that calibration?”

“I’m hoping another four hours. Definitely no less than three, maybe as many as six or seven.”

“We don’t have that time. I don’t suppose you padded those estimates so that when I ask you to do it faster, you can say yes?”

Clive closed his eyes and let out the groan of someone trying to explain over the phone to their grandmother how to fix her email.

“Jason,” Clive said, “the messengers screwed up. Again. The device, as calibrated by them, wouldn’t have worked. They designed that thing without access to the astral space we examined and without access to the tree. Their arrogance made them think they could get it right without those and they were wrong. Very, very wrong. We’ve got Carlos deciphering the corruption in the ambient magic. Farrah figuring out how to set up an array in this bizarre magic environment. If we didn’t have Belinda, we’d spend half our time finding workarounds for a hundred little problems and magic incompatibilities. My job is to adapt all that to the device so it can actually do the thing it was designed to. This is the most complex improvised multi-aspect array ritual I’ve ever heard of. If any one of us wasn’t here, you’d be looking at days to pull all this together. If at all.”

“Okay,” Jason said. “I’m just saying that the citadel doesn’t have the time you need. Not probably doesn’t. *Doesn’t.*”

“Jason, if the citadel needs more hours, you need to find them. If we’re going to try activating the device right now, we might as well wander out and let the dead eat us. If the timing is impossible, then it’s time for you to do something impossible. It’s kind of your thing, right?”

Jason let out a groaning sigh.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Clive headed back to the ritual being set up while Jason flew over to where Miriam was directing the defences. The undead were streaming into the tunnels like a river now and the defenders had been employing a measured withdrawal strategy. The adventurers,

cultists and brighthearts were the frontline while the elemental messengers made ranged attacks from the rear.

This had frustrated some of the other defenders until one of the elementals got careless and was caught by an undead surge as the frontline pulled back. The defenders had watched the power drain out of him in an instant, like a plug had been pulled. Moments later, he was back on his feet and fighting for the enemy.

The divine power infusing the undead had proven a major problem. It was draining many of the attacks against them of their power before they had a chance to make an impact. This was especially true for attacks made with elemental power, leaving the messengers with limited combat value. It affected other powers as well, especially the more overtly magical ones. Conjured projectiles were effective, but blasts of energy were diminished or negated entirely. Gordon's butterflies gained no traction, growing dim and vanishing as soon as they neared the undead. They didn't even explode as normal when destroyed.

Jason didn't try deploying Colin. The leech monster fed on life force, and while he could chew up dead organic matter, the poisons that were his main strength would be ineffective. Without Jason to make the undead vulnerable first, their dead flesh would be largely impervious. Given that he didn't want to risk an army of undead worms coming at them, Jason kept Colin inside his body, boosting his regeneration. Once things got hairy, he was probably going to need it.

The defenders reaped countless undead for every inch of surrendered ground, but the dead kept coming and there was only so much ground to surrender. There was still some way to the array chamber where they would need to make a final stand, but that moment was coming.

"How long on the ritual?" Miriam asked Jason as he approached. "At the current rate, they'll reach the array chamber in a couple of hours, and I don't trust that estimate. Right now we're only seeing the dregs of the undead, and we know they have stronger ones."

"They're currently dividing their efforts between us and the citadel chamber," Jason said. "If the citadel falls, it doesn't matter if things accelerate here because we'll already be done. Even so, we need more than a couple of hours."

"How much more?"

"Somewhere between three and seven hours from now. And by the two hours you estimate it'll take the undead to reach the array chamber, the citadel expects to be gone. Maybe long gone. Their wall is already looking shaky."

"Operations Commander, I'll do everything I can to buy us as much time as possible. Even putting aside our less-than-ideal allies, the adventurers here represent an incredible amount of power. I'll spend our lives if that's what it takes, but I can probably get you the hours you need here. But I can't do anything about the citadel."

"I know."

Miriam frowned, her commanding voice lowering to a near whisper.

"Operation Commander. Jason. I know you like to talk about doing the impossible. If that is anything more than just talk, now is the time."

"Why do people keep asking me to do the impossible?"

"I haven't known you that long, but you kind of talk about it a lot. Wasn't that the whole reason they put you in charge?"

"Just between you and me? It's a lot easier when it's just talk. I guess this is why they say put up or shut up."

"Does this mean you're shutting up?"

"You're right; you haven't known me that long."