

Chapter 786

Naught But Faith

While the divine ghost fire continued to burn, it was fading in strength. What had once annihilated the lesser undead, swiftly burned through the silvers and strongly impeded the golds was now far less efficacious. Miriam adjusted tactics accordingly, bringing forward the adventurers with wide-area attacks that had been taking the chance to recoup their mana.

Jason was finally able to deploy Gordon's butterflies effectively, his aura suppressing the undeath energy in areas where the ghost fire was too weak to do so anymore. He found himself alongside Zara, the allegedly former princess of the Storm Kingdom. Her wind and water powers had been suppressed for most of the fight, her elements clashing with the natural array. The undeath energy had suppressed it, but the undead had then started absorbing her elemental powers, along with those of everyone else.

The ghost fire had suppressed the undead's ability to absorb magic, but blowing all her mana on area attacks at that stage would have been redundant. Only now that the fires were weakening could she make a worthwhile contribution. The undead were rallying but their power to devour magic was still suppressed, partly by the ghost fire and partly by Jason's aura.

Zara found herself shoulder-to-shoulder with Jason. He wasn't deep amidst the enemy the way he usually fought, leaving that to the elemental messengers who had launched themselves into the fray when, like her, their powers were suddenly more effective.

Jason was focused on his roundabout approach to area damage. Using his aura, he'd grabbed a handful of weaker undead, unnerving the melee defenders he floated them past, despite his warning them beforehand. He then afflicted one and let it spread butterflies to the others.

Most of the undead he grabbed were hurled back, deep into the undead lines. The mindless undead failed to recognise the threat and let the butterflies run rampant. Jason, in the meantime, had kept one of the undead, he pulled in more unafflicted for butterflies to spread to before again hurling most of them away. He was repeating the process over and over to maximise affliction distribution.

Zara's process was less elaborate: she cast a spell and the undead were destroyed. While Jason was launching undead far into the enemy backline, Zara's spell created a storm of wind and water much closer to the fighting. The storm was much smaller than an

actual hurricane, but in a restricted tunnel, it didn't feel like it. Blades of water severed limbs and sliced hideous undead bodies, while others were tossed into the air and pulled apart like rotten fruit.

Some of the elemental messengers were caught up as well, but Zara mentally wrote them off. Their recklessness in the face of danger meant she was far from the only one to pepper them with area powers.

"How are you throwing zombies through my windstorm?" Zara asked Jason, shouting over the wind of her spell.

"You know we have voice chat, right?" he yelled back.

"Oh," she said, too quiet to hear but her sheepish expression said it loud enough. Jason grinned and opened a private channel.

"How are you getting them through my storm?" she asked again. "It's like they're completely unaffected by the wind."

"I'm using my aura to telekinetically counteract the force of the wind and water your spell is throwing at them."

Her head turned on a swivel to stare at him wide-eyed.

"You're *what?*"

"Your spell isn't that strong at any individual point," he explained. "It's just big. It isn't that hard to sense the individual forces being applied to one object inside the spell's area and apply an equal and opposite force to negate them."

"With your aura?" she exclaimed.

"It's actually great practise. We should do this more."

"I don't know that we'll have regular access to zombies."

Jason laughed, taking his eyes from the battle to give her a side glance. His eyes fell on her copper hair, cropped above her shoulders, shorter than when it had been royal sapphire.

"I owe you an apology," he said.

"What for?"

"Your hair. I had no right to make you do that, however angry I might have been."

"It's just a hairstyle."

"However justified my anger may or may not have been, I don't have the right to tell you what to do with your body. Thinking it's okay to do that may seem harmless when it's hair, but what about when it's not? I'm sorry for that."

"Am I about to get one of your famously questionable moral diatribes?"

"What do you mean, famously questionable?"

She laughed. The sound, like water trickling over rocks, entered Jason's mind through his voice chat, stirring dormant reactions he'd thought long dead. He turned his focus back to the fight, silently admonishing himself.

Jason had been immediately drawn to Zara when they'd met on the other side of the world. She'd still been a teenager and he'd still been an idiot. More of an idiot, he admitted to himself. She was the only woman he'd met whose beauty truly competed with that of Sophie, rank-ups having little improvement to make. The five years before they met again felt like twice that and changed them both, him especially. He had thought those years, followed by events in Rimaros, had completely quashed any lingering affection.

"Do I even have hormones at silver-rank?" he muttered.

"What?" she yelled. "I can't hear you without voice chat."

"It's nothing," he said through chat. "I'm just... I shouldn't have told you to do that with your hair."

"You don't like it?" she asked.

"What kind of lunatic wouldn't like it? You look amazing."

She blinked, flustered.

"I wasn't expecting that," she admitted.

"We may have our differences, but I've got eyes. I bet you had a trail of people following you around like ducklings in Yareh. Are there any loose undead left? I think you blew them all away."

Jason panned his gaze, looking for any weak undead he could grab, but Zara and the other area specialists had cleaned them up for the moment.

"I think you're pretty much out of the weak zombies," Zara told him. "There were some people in Yareh who showed perhaps more interest than I was looking for. I'd appreciate it if you could try to dampen your team spy's enthusiasm."

"You mean Estella?"

"Yes. I'm not as open-minded as she would like."

"She did call dibs."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"I do disagree with something you said, Jason."

"What's that?"

"We don't have differences. You have differences with me, and I understand why. I made some mistakes in Rimaros, and they involved you at a time when you needed space and time to heal from whatever it is you went through on your own world. First I used your

good name when I thought you were dead, then you got caught up with my family. Then, after you finally got away from me, I dropped myself in your path again. After you quite explicitly told me that you didn't want me along. But I'd arranged things so that kicking me out would be more trouble than keeping me. I put you in that position."

"It's a mixed bag," Jason said. "You thought I was dead, in which case I wouldn't care. And as for getting involved with royalty, it turns out Soramir had been watching me from the instant I arrived, so that was inevitable. That last bit, forcing your way onto the expedition, was the only crappy thing I can completely drop on your doorstep. And if we just spend all our time being crappy to one another, we'll both turn into worse people. I'm trying out forgiveness as a philosophy."

"And how is that working out?"

"It's bloody hard. So many people suck, and they're usually the ones you have to forgive. If it was all forgiving beautiful princesses, I'd be all over it."

"I do appreciate it. As I said, while you may have issues with me, I never had any with you."

They both leaned to the side as an undead's severed limb was thrown out of the storm, passing between them to land wetly on the ground behind them.

"Princess, are you hitting on me in the middle of a zombie war?"

"When else am I going to do it? It's always something with you."

Undeath priest Garth Larosse was not happy. His god's nemesis, Death, had no servants in this underground realm, yet had still found pretext to intervene. The territory claimed by Undeath had been driven back to nothing while Death's ghostly fire ravaged their forces. The fires were only truly decisive against the lesser undead, mass-produced from the pits, but that freed the defenders to concentrate on their more powerful forces.

It wasn't an absolute setback; Death's interference could only go so far. The territory could be reclaimed and Death lacked the influence to wipe it clean a second time. The flames would play out, in time, and were already waning, but that time was the critical factor. Undeath had already warned him that they must act with haste to stop what the adventurers were doing, which meant they could not wait for the flames to die out entirely.

Undeath had not told him what the defenders were up to, only that they needed both arrays to accomplish their goal. Garth was certain they would not be able to claim the natural array chamber in time, now, protected as it was by the bulk of the enemy forces and the ghost fire. He would need to refocus his forces on the citadel chamber.

The wall keeping them from the chamber was already hanging by a precarious thread under the weight of their assault. Once breached, they could bring down the citadel and the echo array with it, ending whatever threat had Undeath concerned.

Garth contemplated this inside the city's largest building. It was huge and triangular, with massive crystals in the ceiling that had once bathed everything in yellow light. The elemental power fuelling them had been supplanted, and now their glow was purple. The ground had been covered in firm moss, a triangle playing pitch for some kind of ball sport. The moss was long withered and dead, and most of the space it had occupied now hosted a humungous circular pit.

This was the widest and deepest of the pits that he and his fellow priests had created. Nothing could be seen through the cloud of purple and green miasma within. Nothing, thus far, had emerged from the pit, despite only the best materials going in. The most intact and high-ranking corpse parts, along with the most of the power bestowed upon them by their god. This was not a means to conquer the underground realms but the reason why they were doing it.

Garth came to a decision, to move his forces back from attacking the natural array and add them to the assault on the wall. It would cost them, but he would use up Death's miracle by marching bodies into the fires like a tide if that was what it took. He was about to head for the doors to the massive building when they opened to admit the one priestess amongst his servant clergy.

Jameela's long legs carried her quickly as she came striding towards him. For all the power Garth's skeletal body offered, the addition of the tall, beautiful woman to his group had left him almost sad to have given up his flesh. Capable and intelligent, eager and quick to learn, she was the opposite of another priest he had been forced to bring along.

Jameela quickly reached the edge of the pit. She didn't wear robes, like most of the clergy, but the practical leathers of an adventurer. The short, sharp bow she gave Garth was not a matter of disrespect but hurry.

"High Priest," she said in greeting. "The defenders of the wall have deployed something or someone new. I'm not certain what, exactly, but it tore through some of our strongest undead, even attacking collectively. It's gold-rank, but at a power level like nothing I've ever seen. I withdrew from making more futile attacks and came to report. After our forces stopped assaulting it, it returned to the wall. It's now intervening at our strongest points of attack."

The red lights in the skull sockets that passed for Garth's eyes dimmed as he focused on extending his aura senses. It did not take him long to find what he was looking for. Anger sent the red lights flaring brighter than ever.

"It's a demigod," Garth told her. "Hero has intervened."

"I've never seen anyone who has drunk from the Cup of Heroes," Jameela said. "In retrospect, it's not a startling development. We are pushing them to the brink which is fertile ground for Hero's miracle."

"The problem isn't the miracle but the timing of it," Garth said. "That wall must come down. I was about to order our forces attacking the natural array to back off and reinforce the wall attack. We can take the array in the aftermath, once the threat is dealt with. Redeploy everything to bring down that wall. Collapse it under the sheer weight of bodies if that's what it takes."

"Our resources are many, High Priest, but not infinite. That will deplete us heavily."

"That's the advantage of serving Undeath, Jameela. The harder-fought the battle, the more we have to work with when it's done. This is why everyone is so diligent about suppressing us. They know that unless we are overwhelmingly crushed, every battle makes us stronger and them weaker. The more dangerous our enemies now, the better the servants we will make of them."

A voice filled the air, a deep, harsh rumble that echoed like gravel being dumped into a silo.

"It is not enough," Undeath's voice spoke, and suddenly he was standing before them. Garth and Jameela both dropped to their knees, heads down. Undeath looked like a living man in simple black robes, except for his eyes. Like Garth, they were empty sockets containing a crimson spark.

"Death and Hero have both intervened at this critical juncture," Undeath told them. "Hero was not unexpected, as you reasoned, Priestess Jameela. And as you have said, Garth, the issue is the timing. Alone, neither god's influence would be insurmountable, but both at once requires a response. Death finding a pretext to act was unfortunate."

"I apologise for my failing, Lord," Garth said.

"You have done as I have asked with the resources I have given you," Undeath told him. "If I punish you for following my instructions, I will only end with servants like..."

Death turned to the stone door Jameela had come through as it opened again. It was heavy but not unmanageable for a silver-ranker like Priest Jeff who stepped inside.

"Hey, boss, I think something is going not so great out here..."

Jeff's eyes went wide on spotting Undeath.

“Oh, you’re busy. I’ll come back.”

Jeff backed off and closed the door. Undeath pinched the bridge of his nose.

“If his grandmother wasn’t a high priestess of Destruction... I apologise for his presence, Garth. When dealing with other gods, compromises must be made, even by me.”

“I have naught but faith in you, Lord,” Garth said.

“Thank you, Garth. Stand, both of you.”

As the priest and priestess rose to their feet, Undeath moved to the edge of the pit and they followed.

“Unfortunately,” Undeath said, “We are forced into another compromise.”

Garth looked into the pit and realised what his god was talking about.

“Lord, if we animate it now, it will be too weak a vessel. Without the messenger tree as base material, it will only hold a fraction of the power you intended to bestow.”

“As you have correctly just instructed the priestess, Garth, there is always fresh material in the wake of a battle. Beginning again is costly, yes, but we must answer the threat before us now. If we do not react to the demigod, the wall will hold and the adventurers will complete their goal.”

“It will take some time to ready it,” Garth said. “But if compromise is what you require, there are shortcuts that can be made. The lifespan will be cut short in turn, but that is not the concern here, if I understand correctly.”

“You do. Proceed, Garth.”

The undead priest turned to Jameela.

“Go,” he told her. “Order the others to redirect everything from the array chamber to the wall, then gather the ritualists and bring them here.”

Jameela bowed to Undeath and then to Garth.

“Lord. High Priest.”

She strode away and was soon gone.

“If I may ask, Lord,” Garth said, “what exactly is the threat these adventurers pose?”

“They are attempting to remake reality in this area. If they complete their ritual, you and all of our forces will be cut off from my power. You will retain any that you have prior to being dragged in, but that is all.”

“Remake reality? How is such a thing possible?”

“Cosmic forces, older even than I. Events involved in the very creation of this world. As it stands, we have the numbers while our enemies have the individual power. If we fail and you are brought inside this warped reality, your numbers will be divided as all inside

are scattered at random. Your undead will be separated and unguided; you will need to unify them before they are wiped out in isolated pockets.”

“If we animate the avatar now, will it be brought with us?”

Undeath nodded.

“It is good that you see, Garth. Even imperfect, it will be a repository of my power that you can use. Finding it will be your first priority, even above reclaiming your forces. The ultimate goal in this warped reality will be to conquer the territories into which it will be divided. Doing so will allow you to collect your forces. But, while conquering territories is one thing, uniting them once you have is another. If you lack the requisite ability, even attempting to do so will end only in disaster. It would serve only Destruction, who has gleefully stepped back to watch events unfold.”

“I know not of this power to bend reality to my will, Lord. I assume the other side does?”

“The enemy has one with the power. His name is Jason Asano; kill him if you can. I will give this power to the avatar, so you must find it. Without it, everything else is meaningless.”

Undeath looked to the door.

“The ritualists are about to arrive. Be swift, Garth, and do well. Put your faith in me and I shall put my trust in you.”

Garth bowed.

“Always, Lord Undeath.”

“Two more hours,” Clive told Jason. “Maybe an hour and a half. An hour if you can dig up a miracle from the goddess of knowledge that tells us the rest of what we need to do.”

“We’ve already had two miracles,” Jason told him. “I think that’s more than gracious already.”

“What’s the other one?” Clive asked.

“I’m talking to Marla, in command of the citadel, through Shade. She said someone drank from something called the Cup of Heroes.”

Clive frowned.

“Do we know who?” he asked.

“Not yet. She just said that they’re big and gold and have an actual chance of buying the time you need. What is this magic cup thing? Some kind of power boost miracle?”

“Yeah,” Clive said grimly. “A power that kills you when it’s done. Ask them to find out who used it.”

“Asano,” Miriam said through voice chat. “We need to talk. The undead are pulling back.”