

## Chapter 810

### A Bitter Cup

Undeath's avatar moved through the lightning field in massive strides. As tall as the iron towers dotting the landscape, lightning peppered it to no effect. The magical electricity was more attracted to the avatar than the lightning rods. The undead behemoth reached the mesa in which the controls for the lightning were hidden. It was abandoned now, but electricity arced around the ring of towers on the top.

The giant undead avatar let out a roar that was not angry or pained but a mindless expression of power. It pulled back an arm and then unleashed it in a punch that staved in a massive section of the hollow mesa.

Several territories away, Neil and Gary's group were pushing through an unclaimed territory made up of wetlands and mud flats. Gary was annihilating anything and everything that got in their way, at that moment living anomaly mud monsters. He paused briefly before resuming battle.

Trailing behind the unstoppable demigod were adventurers, brighthearts and cultists. Amongst them was an anthropomorphic rabbit who paused at the exact same moment as Gary. Beside him, Dustin also stopped.

"Is there a problem?" Dustin asked.

"I'm a four-foot rabbit wading through mud that's knee-deep on a tree-trunk prick like you. Of course, there's a problem."

"You're not very likeable," Dustin told him and resumed his path forward.

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Belinda, Taika, Humphrey and Stash had been rushing through territories, fighting when they had to and running when they could. The living anomalies had grown more dangerous with every region they passed through, leaving them increasingly happy at not having any territories of their own. Trying to hold them would have either pinned them down or forced them to leave their claimed territory undefended.

Unencumbered by land they couldn't leave or couldn't defend, they crossed hundreds of kilometres per day, moving through multiple territories. Their mode of travel varied from territory to territory, depending on the terrain. Sometimes Stash turned into a swift steed that could carry them all. Other times they went on foot, relying on silver-rank speed and endurance. One territory had featured floating rocks and Belinda had built them an improvised vehicle. She never had time to figure out why it exploded.

Moving fast proved critical as they realised both how large the transformation zone was and how far they were from their allies. They had encountered the edge of the zone in multiple territories, getting a sense of the geography. The edge was a silvery haze where the landscape broke down like pieces of biscuit dropped in a cup of tea.

They had run-ins with messengers and priests, but the living anomalies had steadily overtaken both as the greater threat. They had always been numerous, making them hard to avoid, but that hadn't been a problem until their power started approaching the strength of their auras.

In one territory, the group ended up hiding in a rocky crevice, a concealment ritual from Belinda making it seem like a flat wall. A massive herd of animals was going by, far too many to fight at their current strength. The creatures were vaguely like heidels but with strange features. They were stockier, with fur instead of scales and horns on their single head.

"Are these the horses Jason keeps talking about?" Belinda wondered.

"Nah, those are some kind of cow," Taika said. "Like aurochs or something."

"It doesn't matter what they are," Humphrey said. "It matters how strong they are. If this is their power now, we silver-rankers will end up as little more than prey once more territories have been claimed."

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Onslow the rune tortoise had the power to change his size. Right now, he was the size of a small car with the neck poking out from his shell the width of a pony. A boy who looked around twelve was riding him and cheering, a leg slung over each side of that neck. The youth looked like a young Humphrey but with darker skin, along with silver hair and eyes.

"Faster!" boy Stash demanded, which Onslow was fully capable of if he flew. Instead, Onslow plodded over the grass on his thick legs, to Stash's ongoing complaint.

A group of adventurers looked on from the top of a large cloud vehicle, under the shade of an awning. Belinda and Clive's groups had stopped for a much-needed rest after running into one another. They were in another unclaimed territory, a grassy savannah where the living anomalies were large and powerful, but easy to see coming.

Humphrey, Belinda, Taika and Stash had been increasingly desperate by the time they encountered Clive's group. They had still been able to fight small groups of anomalies, but the need to move with care had drastically slowed their pace. More than once they had been fighting one group only to flee as another joined the fray. Now they had greater numbers, gold-rankers and, most importantly, friends.

“You don’t look so good, boss,” Belinda told Clive.

Clive’s group’s journey had been slower. They had left the territories held by himself and Constance, an anchor that had not weighed down Humphrey’s group. Those territories were undefended now, but they hoped to cede them to Jason before an enemy snatched them up. Their group’s subsequent movement had not been as fast as Belinda’s, their numbers forcing them to fight where the smaller group could hide and sneak.

The advantage had switched with the growing power of the anomalies. The smaller group were forced to slow down while the larger could still fight. Their numbers and gold-rankers had proven the match of anything they had encountered thus far.

“We can still punch a straight line through territories now we aren’t looking to claim them,” Emir explained. “There’s no dodging the fights, though, and no question they’re growing harder.”

He nodded at the bus-shaped cloud vehicle resting on the grass nearby.

“Since we were drawing anomalies like flies anyway, we’ve started barrelling through in my cloud vehicle. We usually stay close to the ground, though, as the sky has proven dangerous even to my vehicle. There was a swarm of storm locust anomalies that did some real damage, and one territory had clouds that tried to eat us. We fought them off easily enough, but that one made me nervous.”

“We need to find Jason,” Clive said, his voice shaky. As Belinda had observed, he did not look good. Silver-rankers didn’t normally perspire, regardless of the temperature.

Emir looked at his wife who fared a little better than Clive by virtue of her higher rank.

“Yes,” Emir said. “We need to find Jason. All the times he leaves his familiar in our shadows and, now we could use it, nothing. I think. Shade?”

He looked around suspiciously.

“He better not be here,” Emir grumbled.

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In a territory of wetlands, mud flats and mangrove swamps, they couldn’t find a hard, flat surface to draw out a ritual circle. In the end, Neil had one of the earth brighthearts turn river clay into a flat plate and one of the fire brighthearts bake it dry. It wasn’t ideal but it was serviceable. They had tried calling up stone from beneath the mud but the earth brighthearts couldn’t find any.

The entire zone was clay and mud, all infused with elemental water energy that left the fire brighthearts uncomfortable. They had lived their lives with a constant background of fire energy from the natural array around which their society was built. Only the growing

chambers that fed them were different, and most of the fire and magma types were kept away.

Once the platform was finished, Neil went to work. Grand Renewal was the name of Neil's most powerful healing ability, an essence ability that required a ritual to use. One of its features, common to essence ability rituals, was that he could draw it out in lines of pale blue magic. This saved him needed to pour out lines of powder or draw them with chalk. Being an essence ability ritual also reduced the materials required, just a few judiciously placed piles of spirit coins.

Once the ritual diagram was complete, the brighthearts carefully placed a delirious Durrum in the middle. Durrum had been going through withdrawal-like symptoms, worsening as the group pushed itself to move fast. Neil had been putting him through the healing ritual each time they stopped to rest, getting him back into shape enough that he could move on his own instead of being carried.

Neil had become the de facto leader of the group after Durrum's territories were claimed by Gary. Gary might have been the most powerful member of the group but he didn't have the same trust with the brighthearts. Gary's power, and his role holding the wall against undead besiegement, were unquestionable. But to the brighthearts, he was more a phenomenon than a person.

Neil, by contrast, was approachable. They had seen him willing to work not just with but under their own kind, yet still prove not just an important, but effective leader. He had been critical to their successful fights against the Undeath priests, both in developing tactics and his using his powers, both on the battlefield and in the aftermath. Everyone loved a healer. Having proven himself without elevating himself, the majority brightheart group accepted his leadership given Durrum's incapacity.

Gary was isolated within the group. Where Neil and Dustin had made a place for themselves amongst the brighthearts, Gary was a walking miracle. He was venerated, but not incorporated. The fact that he was the singular force propelling them through the territories only highlighted this, widening both the group's admiration of him and the gap between them.

He wasn't completely alone, of course. The adventurers had known him before drinking from the cup of heroes and offered both commiseration and companionship. It was just a very small group compared to the large collection of brighthearts and cultists.

They had picked up even more as they roamed around, mostly brighthearts but also a couple of cultists and even some essence users. One was another member of Korinne's team, Kalif, who had been roaming around with a gold-rank brightheart. The brightheart,

Jindella, had tried to take command of the group. After words failed, the support for Neil surprising her, she foolishly tried force. On that front, Gary's support was all Neil needed.

Also amongst the essence users were some non-adventurers; a pair of researchers from the Magic Society. They told the group about how almost half of the research contingent arrived in the transformation zone together, but now only two survived. The fate of the researchers they didn't arrive with they had no idea.

While on the move, Gary was their key to fast movement through territories. With Undeath's avatar the only thing able to challenge him, nothing was able to divert their path as they searched for others. The addition of the gold-rank Jindella gave them a strong presence to watch their backs, making progress even more stable.

No matter how strong the living anomalies grew, Gary ploughed through them. No matter how many Undeath priests appeared before him, they were driven back. The largest group they had seen was led by numerous gold-rankers, yet they turned around and fled on sight, not even attempting a battle.

The rabbit had been moving with them but did not enjoy the mud and water of the swamps and wetlands dominating their current territory. He was able to hop across the surface while on the move, but anytime they stopped he found himself chest deep. After waiting for Durrum's healing ritual to finish, the rabbit approached Neil and took him aside.

"What is it?" Neil asked.

"Turn on your privacy bubble thing," the rabbit said quietly.

Neil took a brooch from his pocket and pressed on the amber gem. A shimmering privacy field snapped into place around them. The rabbit looked over at Gary who was standing alone, radiating golden light as he watched for threats.

"You need to have a talk with your hairy golden god," the rabbit said.

"Why?"

"You know how I woke up just knowing how to use the controls in the lightning mesa?"

"Yeah."

"Well, now I've forgotten it all. Whatever link I had to that place is gone."

"You think someone else claimed the territory?"

"Someone claimed the territory twice already. First Pebbles, and then great gold merkin took it from him. Neither time I lost the connection."

"Then what are you thinking?"

"Well, shiny boy and the adventurers he had with him were talking about a size-changing undead super-monster with a penchant for random destruction. I think it claimed

the territory and smashed the mesa to rubble in the process. Or because it was angry lightning kept hitting it. Or just because. And given that he owned the territory at the time, there's no way the leader of the Thundercats over there failed to notice. You might want to enquire about that before Lion-O starts falling over on us too."

"I'll speak with him," Neil said. "But, before that, there's something you and I need to discuss while we're under this privacy screen."

"What's that?" the rabbit asked.

"You call Durrum Pebbles, and Gary a lot of things."

"So what?"

"So, they both have names and you're going to start using them," Neil said. "They've both made incredible sacrifices while you were sitting in a bunker, playing with lightning. As of the moment I drop this privacy screen, you are going to treat them with the dignity they have more than earned."

"Or what?"

"Or when we leave this place, you go one way and everyone else goes another."

"You'll kick me out over some nicknames?"

"I'll kick you out over disrespecting the people that have earned our respect the most."

The rabbit stared at Neil from where he was half-submerged in the muddy water of the flats.

"Fine," he said, then started pushing through the water and out of the screen.

Neil dropped the screen, walked over to Gary and put it up again.

"That damn rabbit," he grumbled.

"You really think Jason made him somehow?"

"He keeps spouting off nonsense that no one has ever heard of and doesn't seem to care."

"That's Jason alright."

"It's like Jason was saving up every bad personality trait he's gotten rid of or toned down since knew him, and he put them all in this rabbit."

"We'll see what happens when we put him in a room with Jason. But you didn't come over here to talk about the rabbit."

"No."

"You want to talk about the territory," Gary said.

"Yeah."

Gary's unified territory had become very large. Certainly larger than what had driven Durrum to the edge as Gary had added that to his existing territory and remained fine. Neil had initially worried about the effect of that on Gary's mind after what happened to Durrum, but it turned out he was unaffected. He'd just been grumpy about people asking questions when they should have been running away from the avatar of the evil god.

"Your territory is gone?" Neil asked.

"We left it undefended and it now it belongs to the avatar."

"We knew it was the most likely outcome when we set out."

"I could have commanded the messengers we left behind to hold it off."

"They'd have died without stopping it."

"They'd have died slowing it down."

"It's slow enough. You're the one who said it's too mindless to chase us efficiently. Has that changed?"

"Maybe. Once the Undeath high priest gets ahold of it, the avatar will stop roaming around, chasing after anything that wanders into view. You know all the messengers we left behind belong to the avatar now. The time will come when we have to fight them, and we could have avoided that. Made sure they died before they were turned against us."

"While they're alive, there's still a chance to save them."

"Messengers don't deserve saving. They deserve to die."

"I don't believe that. And I don't think you do either. I know you're angry, Gary. You were served a bitter cup and you have every right to be furious. But I also know you're too smart and too good to let yourself take it out on victims."

"You sound like Jason."

"Whatever Jason might think, Gary, our world had morals long before Jason arrived to bequeath us his otherworldly wisdom. You know when something is right or wrong just as well as I do. Yes, we kill the Undeath priests on sight. They've made their choices, but the messengers are slaves. Slaves with shackles on their hearts and minds, and those are the adult messengers. The ones we've been waking up in these territories are children. It might not seem that way, but that's what they are. Yes, we kill the ones we have to, but we save the ones we can."

Gary nodded. It was slight and reluctant, but he nodded.

"Now," Neil said. "You lost the territory. When?"

"A few hours ago. While we were on the move."

"Any symptoms? Anything like what Durrum is going through."

"No."

“Are you sure? Don’t hide it from me, Gary. We’re relying on you, and we can make arrangements if you need rest. If you collapse on us at the wrong moment, though, we’re in real trouble.”

“I’m fine. Compared to the power inside me, what owning territories did was nothing.”  
Neil looked him up and down.

“Alright. But if anything changes, let me know. I’m going to check on Durrum and then we can move out again.”

“How is he?”

“Getting stronger, but slower than I’d like. He needs proper rest.”

“Maybe he’ll get it soon. While we’ve been talking, a group crossed over into this territory.”

“Who?”

“Some adventurers and messengers. It looks like they’re moving together.”

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Rick barrelled through the mud, splashing it aside like the prow of a boat until he reached Hannah and threw his arms around her. Behind him, Marek floated awkwardly over the mud under Gary’s suspicious glare. Next to him, Phoebe Geller stood on the surface of the wet mud as if it were solid ground. She gave Gary a friendly wave before going after Rick at a more sedate pace.

“Thank the gods,” Rick sobbed, holding onto his fiancée as if he was trying to cocoon her.

“Rick, you got mud all over me,” she said, her words hard but her tone soft. She didn’t hide the relief flooding her aura.

The rest of their team, Phoebe, Dustin and Hannah’s twin Claire, all came together.

“Thank the gods,” Rick said again, his voice bursting with joy at having his full team reunited.

“Now we need to find everyone else,” Dustin said. “We were just about to head off in the direction you came from,”

“Good,” Phoebe said. “We’re scouting from a large group. Everyone is finally coming together.”