

## Chapter 798

### Rock Climbing

Farrah glowered as she reached for another handhold on the icy cliff face. The steam produced by the ice carried on the powerful winds blasting her was immediately carried off by those same winds.

“Oh yeah, let’s all just jump off this cliff,” she said bitterly in voice chat. “We can all fly.”

“How was I meant to know?” Sophie asked from the top of the cliff. Her flight power involved wind manipulation, and while not working as normal, had at least allowed her to return to the cliff top instead of being smashed into it like Jason and Farrah.

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- You have entered a zone of wind infused with abnormal magic.
  - Flight powers are impeded or disabled, depending on their nature.
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The flight powers of Jason’s shadowy void cloak and Farrah’s fiery wings had both been entirely negated, turning their attempt to fly into a swift plummet. They were both smashed into the cliff face by the wind, tumbling down until they managed to grab handholds on the rock. After Sophie returned to the top, Jason shadow-jumped to a Shade body hidden in her shadow, leaving Farrah to climb alone. Rock climbing, even in extreme conditions, wasn’t a challenge for anyone with silver-rank strength and coordination. That fact did not improve Farrah’s mood.

“I blame you,” Sophie told Jason as they waited side by side. The cliff edge was a narrow ledge just beyond the veil beyond which lay Jason’s territory.

“How is this my fault?” Jason asked.

“You’re the one who wanted to explore the new territory before unifying it with the one you’ve already got. If you’d used the magic ball first, you could probably control those winds.”

“I should,” Jason said. “But don’t you have the spirit of adventure? Don’t you want to cross rickety rope bridges over bottomless chasms? Traverse windswept mountain trails as the vast panorama spans out before you?”

“That does appeal,” Sophie said. “It’s nice when adventuring means something other than going places just to kill things. I don’t know how open to it Farrah will be.”

They both looked to the edge as an arm came up like a zombie bursting from the grave. Farrah clambered up, not bothering to stand. She rolled onto the ledge and just lay there.

“You’re not wrong,” she told them. “We promised you fun adventures back in the day, and this is the kind of thing we were talking about. We didn’t think it would be in some fragmented reality fissure, but that’s just how it goes sometimes. Or most of the time when you’re around, Jason.”

“So you’re up for following this trail through the gorge?” Jason asked.

“I would be,” Farrah said, “but we’ve wasted enough time already, and you know that. We can’t spend days making our highly inefficient way through an entire mountain range while the Undeath priests are out there claiming territories.”

Jason’s shoulders slumped.

“Yeah,” he begrudgingly acknowledged. “I’ll go get Jali so she can first-contact the messengers when they come out of stasis.”

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The leader of the priests of Undeath was Garth. The drape of the robes over his skeletal body showed that it did not have the shape of a human, while masking exactly what form it did take. Most of those who knew had been slain and turned into Garth’s undead puppets or new elements of the body whose secrets they had died for.

Having claimed the territory, a strange land of glass buildings and steel automatons, the messengers now free of stasis were descending from the sky. They looked nearly identical to one another with corpse-white skin, grey hair and glowing purple eyes. In perfect unison they alighted on the ground and dropped to one knee in supplication, heads bowed.

“This,” Garth said, “will do very nicely.”

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Neil and Dustin found that claiming their first territory had been easy enough, their defender-healer combination being very hard to eliminate. The only problem was that it had taken too long to clear out the undead and living anomalies without specialised damage dealers. The final boss monster had been an especially exhausting slog. In the aftermath of taking it down, the pair were engaged in an argument as to its nature.

“I’m telling you, it’s a radish,” Dustin said.

“Turnip,” Neil said. “Look at the pink and white skin. Radishes don’t have that.”

“And turnips aren’t ten metres across with six legs and a mouth full of teeth the length of my hand.”

“You’re suggesting that radishes are?” Neil asked.

“They might be,” Dustin said unconvincingly. “Radishes can be quite varied.”

“That would be quite the exotic varietal,” Neil said.

He used his loot power on the boss, so along with the genesis orb that would have come out anyway there was a pile of spirit coins and a large basket full of vegetables.

“Hey, check that,” Neil said. They ignored the magic sphere to look over the basket.

“There are radishes *and* turnips in here,” Dustin complained. “That doesn’t resolve anything.”

Neil eventually absorbed the orb, claiming the territory. Once he did, his senses expanded over the whole space and he looked up.

“Uh oh.”

“What is it?” Dustin asked.

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- You have claimed a territory.
  - You may initiate territorial conflict to annex hostile territory.
  - Another territory holder may annex your territory should you surrender it to them or if you are killed while in territorial conflict.
  - You may voluntarily allow another territory holder to annex your territory without conflict.
  
  - You have the right to imprint upon the inhabitants of this territory kept in stasis.
  - You are currently separated from your deity and none of your personal powers were sourced from your god to provide an imprint template.
  - You lack any inherent power that would allow you to imprint on the inhabitants held in stasis. They will be removed from stasis but will remain in a comatose state until imprinted or they die. Remaining in this state will eventually lead to their deaths.
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“Silver-rankers can survive a fall from just about any height, right?” Neil asked.

“Yeah,” Dustin said warily. “Why do you ask?”

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Neil pulled the last comatose messenger from the divot it had made on landing and carried it to where he and Dustin had put the others. They were set out in rows along the gentle slope of a hill with short grass and just enough tree coverage to let sunlight dapple through a loose canopy. Neil’s new territory was a pastoral region and Dustin had picked out the pleasant spot. The pair looked at their work with satisfaction.

“Of all the places you could wake up confused and oblivious as to who you are and what’s going on,” Dustin said, “this is probably where I’d pick.”

“Assuming they don’t wake up in murder mode,” Neil said. “We don’t know what state they’ll be in. These are the messengers that were created by the tree. They’ve spent their entire lives in a state of violent madness. Who knows what they’ll be like with that influence removed.”

“Maybe they’ll be nice,” Dustin suggested.

“That would be great, but I’ll be happy if they stay unconscious and we never find out.”

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Neil pushed his influence into a neighbouring territory, anticipating a flood of living anomalies. Instead, there was more of a light drizzle. After dispatching them, he and Dustin moved to the veil between territories, looking through. The veil was almost completely translucent, compared to the shadowy boundary to other neighbouring territories.

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- Each [Living Anomaly] in this territory has been eliminated.
  - Multiple territory owners have extended their influence into this territory.
  - All other territory owners must abandon or cede this territory or die before it can be claimed.
  - Body of final [Living Anomaly] is currently sealed. It will not produce a [Stable Genesis Core] until a single claimant remains in the territory.
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The new territory had a dark sky, not from it being night but from the black clouds choking the sky. Rain was pouring down hard and the darkness was lit up every few seconds by a flash of lightning. Most of them were quite distant, yet a few struck close every minute, throwing up dirt and mud.

The landscape was black earth and dust that pounding rain had turned to a mud slurry. The wet heavy air smelled of ozone and charcoal. The terrain was dotted with mesas, cracked and blackened by lightning. The flashes shone blindingly from black stone rendered glossy and slick by the rain washing over it. There was no visible plant life, not even charred remains in the inhospitable landscape.

In place of trees, a forest of rough iron poles jutted from the ground, rocks and even the tops of the mesas. Anywhere from five to ten metres tall, the poles grounded any lightning strike that came close, crackling with energy as they grounded the electricity.

Both men had pulled rain-deflecting items from their dimensional bags before stepping through the veil. The devices were brooches that shrouded them in magical fields that caused water to slide right off. They were usually more convenient than the floating umbrella Jason had left back on Earth, but not when the rain ignored the magic. The water passed right through, soaking their clothes immediately and they turned to look at each other.

“Iron rank rain deflector?” Neil asked, yelling over the sound of rain. Dustin nodded with a laugh.

The lightning rods didn't stop the lightning bolts from flaring magic, not just blinding but bombarding their magic and aura senses. Like a constant chain of flash-bang grenades, the thunder and lightning assaulted their spiritual senses as savagely as their sight and hearing. Trudging through the rain, soaked to the bone in seconds, Neil and Dustin soon had pounding headaches.

The pair moved forward by dashing from pole to pole between lightning strikes. They went close enough to be shielded from the strikes but not so close the energy channelled by a struck rod arced into them. Fortunately, while the poles didn't stop the sensory bombardment, they did make it less overwhelming. It was enough that Neil and Dustin could talk between peals of thunder, although they didn't chat as they made their way through the zone.

Silver-rank speed allowed them to cover a lot of ground, yet as an hour led into two, the territory was feeling both endless and empty. Finding a rocky overhang for a break, the pair discussed their situation.

"That system message said multiple people were claiming this territory," Dustin said. "Where are they?"

Neil looked at the space around them. The overhang rested over a slight slope and the ground under them was wet dirt instead of ankle-deep mud. They were both dripping onto it as they leaned against the stone wall.

"Best guess?" Neil said. "Huddling under rocky overhangs."

"Are we wasting time here?" Dustin asked. "We've already sunk a couple of hours into this and found nothing. It feels like that could continue indefinitely. We might have passed right by someone and not even noticed."

"You're suggesting an alternative?" Neil asked.

"We could go back and try another territory. There were more bordering yours, right? We picked this one at random"

"It's an option," Neil said. "I can sense the direction of my territory, so I'm not worried about finding it. I'd like to keep going, though, at least for now. With multiple people looking to claim this territory, odds are high that one of them is an ally."

"Like the Builder cult," Dustin grumbled.

"That wouldn't be an ideal pick, but we lack some damage options if we're going to progress at any real pace. Not to mention that we need to find a gold-ranker from our side before we find one from the other. They're likely almost as blind as we are here, so it offers us a better chance of escape if we get unlucky."

"Alright," Dustin agreed. "But how long do we keep at it?"

“It’s been about two hours,” Neil said. “If the next two are the same we’ll cut our losses.”

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Jason was watching Jali fly off with the new batch of messengers towards the fortress.

“Sandwich?” he offered.

“That’d be nice,” Farrah said.

Jason opened his inventory and frowned at the window.

“What is it? Farrah asked.

“I just noticed that something the Healer gave me isn’t in my inventory anymore. How did it get taken out of my soul?”

“Could the Healer have taken it back?”

“I’m pretty sure he couldn’t. Where did it go?”

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More than an hour after their rest stop, Neil and Dustin finally stumbled upon signs of other people. Flashes of magic, not just white lightning but the smouldering red of fiery elemental magic lit up in the distance. They stopped, huddled near a lightning rod.

“It must be quite the battle,” Dustin yelled over the sound of rain. “That’s a lot of flashing.”

Neil pointed at the top of a tall mesa, closer to the battle than they were. Dustin followed his gaze, seeing a lightning bolt strike the top. It hit across not just one lightning rod but a ring of them, dancing around before being dissipated.

“We might actually see something from up there,” Neil yelled.

“Looks like there might be something special up there,” Dustin shouted back. “Worth checking out?”

Neil nodded and they moved in that direction, finding the mesa to be made up of smooth wet stone. Despite the realm only having existed for hours, it felt like the rain had been polishing the rock for centuries. Despite this, the climb was without mishap. Both Neil and Dustin were strong, even for their rank, and could push their fingers into the rock like pitons.

Reaching the top, they found the first signs of civilisation outside of the lightning rods. The rods themselves were much taller than normal, some twenty metres high. The lightning that struck them was not grounded, instead playing around the circle of rods, diminishing with each leap.

Underneath the rods, around three metres high, was a series of glass panels like slanted rooftops, sloping into funnels for the water to flow into. The rain was being collected in pipes that ran into the stone top of the mesa which itself was artificially flattened. That dry stone was red rather than charred black like everything else in the territory. The final feature was an elevating platform in the middle of the mesa top.

Under the cover of the glass roof, the constant hammering of thunder was muffled to almost nothing. Even with nothing but rain in the way, the lightning flashes were less blinding, as if seen through smoked glass. Both men let out sighs of relief.

“Is there a tiny man with a chisel in your head too?” Dustin asked with a wince. He grinned at not needing to shout.

“Yeah,” Neil croaked, grinning back. “I never thought flat stone would look so luxurious. And I once spent six months in an astral space that was a broken city overgrown with jungle.”

“What do you think this is?” Dustin asked, waving an arm at the elevating platform. “Do you think it works? If not, we could probably pry it up. This place must be at least partially hollowed out, right?”

“So it would seem,” Neil said. “We should probably check out the battle before we check it out. I get the feeling it won’t be a quick look when we do.”

“Yeah,” Dustin said. “But just throwing an idea out there, how about we have a nice nap first? Pull out some bedrolls and sleep for... not that long. Two or three days, tops.”

Neil chuckled and started peeling off the drenched clothing plastered to his body.

“That might be a bit much,” Neil said, “but I will take a change of clothes first. Remind me to buy a better water shield when we get out of here. That’s what I get for buying a rain deflector in the desert, I guess. I’ve had this one since Greenstone.”

“Same,” Dustin said. “This weather’s heavier than anything the delta threw at us.”

They stripped down, shared a vial of crystal wash and put on dry clothes. Only then did they move closer to the edge and look out at the battle. Despite the improved view, they couldn’t see much more than flashes of magic through the dark and the rain.

“Well, that’s not very helpful,” Neil said.

“What did you expect, looking that far through the driving rain,” a voice said from behind them. They both span around to see an unusual and non-threatening figure.

“What, you’ve never seen a four-foot humanoid rabbit in a top hat and tuxedo before? [Bleep]ing rubes. Wait, what the [bleep] was that? [Bleep]. [Bleep]. What the [bleep]? This is some grade-A bull[bleep].”

“You don’t have four feet,” Dustin pointed out. “You’ve got hands.”

“It’s a unit of measurement,” Neil said. “I’ve heard Jason using it but he gets angry at himself when he does. He always blames dungeons for some reason. And also dragons somehow.”

“What do dragons have to do with units of measurement?” Dustin asked.

“I don’t know who your friend is,” the rabbit said, “but it’s not an actual dragon you chuckleheads. It’s a [bleep]ing game. Ah [bleep] this [bleep] for a bag of [bleep]s. What [bleep]ing [bleep]hole installed a [bleep]ing bleeper in me?”