

## Chapter 818

### Risking Everything

In the battle that took place in the underground city of the brighthearts, the priests of Undeath had largely held back. They had what amounted to an infinite supply of the unliving to throw them at the enemy until the enemy crumbled. This was not the case when the two cloud vehicles came barrelling over the rocks and sand of the desert, trails of dust thrown up in their wake.

Undeath priests came in different varieties, from somewhat ordinary essence users to bizarre undead mockeries. This included higher-order undead, like vampires commanding armies of deathless ghouls. There were liches; highly intelligent undead with powerful tricks to escape final destruction. Liches all wielded potent magic, be that the essences they had in life or more eldritch and alien powers. Others were less common forms of undead, such as the zemravore, Garth. There was a being that looked to be made of solidified shadow, in the shape of a human but twice as tall. It used magic to turn the zombies and skeletons around it into shadowy, ethereal entities that were harder to cut down.

Although there was no shortage of undead oddities amongst the priests, most were still amongst the living. Employing necromantic essence combinations banned by the Adventure Society, their powers were not focused on direct combat but on creating, commanding, and enhancing the undead. The overall undead minions under their command were fewer than they had access to in the last massive battle, but their direct participation made each undead much stronger.

The Undeath forces were situated on a plateau, looking down on the desert where the two vehicles were approaching. The priests stirred their minions into action, bolstering them with magic and sending them into the attack.

This meant descending the plateau, the edge of which led to a mix of steep slopes and outright cliffs. This was not a challenge to navigate as the weakest of the undead were silver-rank. Most of the army in the brightheart city had been bronze, but anything that weak had been annihilated by the transformation zone's living anomalies.

Some undead simply leapt off, unfussed about the landing. Others were empowered in various ways, allowing them to handle the terrain. Simple skeletons were turned into skeleton mages through the necromancy of their masters. Runes carved themselves into the bones of the skeletons, lighting up with different coloured magic. Dark smoke shrouded their feet and carried them into the air, at which point they started flinging simple

projectiles of fire, electricity or shimmering force. These weren't potent attacks, taken individually, but their raw number made for a storm of magic landing on the two vehicles, still kilometres distant.

Vampire priests drained the life out of brightheart and messenger prisoners they had claimed for the purpose, using that life force to make their ghouls faster and stronger. The emaciated figures scrambled down the steep mountainside off the plateau's edge.

Zombies and other macabre creations of the undead priests were given a variety of enhancements. Some grew wings of rotting flesh and took to the skies, or claws that dug into stone, letting them climb down vertical cliffs at speed.

Alongside the undead, the messengers claimed by the undeath priests were on the move. The pallid messengers claimed by the priests had proven amongst the weakest variety, compared to those claimed by other messengers or the brighthearts. That changed when those messengers were handed over to the avatar of Undeath. The meagre undeath they had been given by the priests had been bolstered with divine might, making them both more corpse-like and more powerful. Even in the avatar's absence their new strength remained, shown off as they soared through the air, leaving trails of purple sparks in their wake.

Another factor of the messengers gaining more power from the avatar was that they now enjoyed enhancements from the auras of the Undeath priests. Although the messengers were still technically alive, the potent undeath energy inside them responded to the aura powers the same way as true undead.

Necromancers whose powers came from essence abilities, meaning most of the priests, almost always had aura powers that bolstered the undead. This wasn't the specific transformations and extra powers from their other abilities but baseline enhancement of the undeath energy animating them. This was a massive force multiplier for the undead minions, and the reason Garth needed to hunt Jason down.

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The rooftop lounge of Jason's vehicle had closed over, armour panels emerging from the cloud-stuff to shield it from the rain of magic projectiles. Jason and Miriam had gone inside, joining the Shades in the piloting room that Jason was still deciding between calling a cockpit or a bridge. He thought cockpit was more accurate but he really wanted the spaceship vibes.

Rather than look out the windscreen, Jason closed his eyes and connected his senses to his cloud vehicle. The vehicle was a spirit domain, giving Jason near total power within it. That did not extend to outside the vehicle, but he was able to use it like a signal

booster for his aura, affecting the aura itself and the magical perception that used it as a basis. It wasn't a raw strength upgrade but something that impacted specific aspects. For his perception, he was able to multitask better inside his mind, actively observing more at once. For his aura, it made it harder for the Undeath priests to push back against with their own auras.

Jason's aura carried with it not just his aura power, but also all the aspects of his aura he had developed. This included the power he had learned from the goddess of death to diminish undeath energy. This made his aura anathema to the Undeath priests, whose auras were all infused with it.

Jason's power to affect the undead bordered on divine. Death had shown him how to reshape his aura with an effectiveness that mortals could normally not touch upon. It was the kind of gift that gods offered their followers temporarily before taking the power back. Death had shown Jason how to effectively bestow that gift upon himself. Added to the god-adjacent power of his spirit domain that he was using to bolster his aura and Jason wasn't confronting the undead like a mortal but in the manner of a god.

Jason was not a god, however. Using their tools in their way made it possible for an aura face-off against all those priests, gold-rankers included. The problem was that Jason lacked the one thing that truly made gods what they were: infinite power. His aura was still the basis for everything he was doing, and while it was implausibly strong for his rank, that rank was still silver. That he could effectively pit himself against the priests at all was a borderline miracle, complete with the divine tools to make it happen.

Jason's limits meant that he was unable to dominate the undead forces the way Death had with her miracle. He reached a spiritual stalemate with his foes, where they couldn't suppress his aura but could shield their undead from it. In turn, Jason couldn't weaken the undead beyond their normal baseline, but he could stop the priestly auras from making them stronger.

He couldn't shut down the specific enhancements of the undead from various priest powers, be it transformations or the blood-fuelled enhancements to vampire ghouls. But the aura powers enhancing the basic undead energy flowing through them all was shut down, negating the force-multiplier of raising their baseline power.

While Jason was flooding the battlefield with his aura, Miriam had been using his communication power to issue last-minute commands to their forces. Most of them were on the larger vehicle belonging to Emir.

"How are you doing?" she asked Jason.

“Not as well as I’d like,” Jason said as he opened his eyes. “I’ve put a dent in the priests’ ability to give blanket strength upgrades to their minions, but that’s about it.”

“I’ll take it,” Miriam said. “It’s a miracle you can do even that much, given how many gold-rankers have to be pushing back on you.”

“Miracle adjacent,” Jason corrected. “The goddess of death provided me with a trick built for purpose and she didn’t muck about. My team were pretty cranky when they heard what I traded for it, but they don’t understand the magnitude of what she showed me. And it’s not even the loss they think it is. Assuming we win.”

“And if we don’t win?”

“Then it won’t matter either way.”

“True enough,” Miriam said and then moved to peer out the windscreen. “I’m not seeing a good spot to establish a beachhead. It’s all just open ground leading to that plateau the undead are pouring down.”

Something solid hit the vehicle, rocking it heavily. The vehicle was moving smoothly forward again a moment later, the hover bus having what amounted to perfect air suspension.

“Damage?” Miriam asked.

“We’re good,” Jason said. “The armour panels offer resilience and the cloud material disperses force. The extra features I picked up from that noble house in Rimaros have worked out much better than expected. We’re holding up almost as well as Emir’s vehicle, so I’m expecting him to ask about them once we’re done.”

Miriam nodded and turned back to the view through the windscreen. Magic projectiles were falling like hail and undead waterfalled off the plateau in the distance, moving down to the flatlands.

“We need to start setting up before the enemy brings their full power to bear,” Miriam said. “Since nowhere in this barren dust flat is better than any other, we may as well stop here.”

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Adventurers, brighthearts and cultists spilled out of the two vehicles after they pulled to a stop. They were on an unremarkable flat of barren red rock, the dust they kicked up dry and chalky on the tongue. The sun beat down hard, blinding glints flashing off any glossy surface, from lacquered armour to polished blades.

Under Miriam’s direction, they formed a defensive perimeter. It was manned on all sides but focused on defending from the front and above where the enemy was attacking.

The battle was yet to reach an earnest clash, still consisting of ranged attacks pouring in from the Undeath side. The wave of minions heading their way would arrive soon enough.

For now, the undead were harassing with projectile attacks from the enhanced undead and the pallid messengers. The messengers had picked up new abilities after being claimed by the avatar and could now fling purple energy projectiles. The ubiquitous assault was endurable, thanks to Jason preventing the power scale of the enemy from ramping up under the auras of the priests.

The adventurers and their allies only made token counterattacks, saving their strength for the battle to come. With a tsunami of undead heading their way, it would come soon. In the meantime, they defended the space where the two vehicles were breaking down, returning to their cloud flasks. It would take time to turn the vehicles into strongholds.

Miriam was barking out orders as combatants rushed around them. The brighthearts lacked the strength of the adventurers, but they were using their elemental powers to set up defensive emplacements. Trenches with walls of stone spikes waiting for anyone who leapt over. Shelters where ranged attackers could duck in and about between heavy and total cover. Tunnels allowing safe traversal between different areas of the defensive line.

Emir and Shade were standing by the cloud flasks still sucking in the cloud stuff of the vehicles. Jason stood next to Miriam, looking like a human-shaped void portal with his cloak wrapped around him. The inside of his hood was dark, indicating his eyes were closed as he concentrated on challenging the priests with his aura.

“With the possible exception of when the avatar arrives,” Miriam told Jason, “this will be the most precarious part of the battle. We have to hold this position long enough for our twin fortresses to set up.”

“Then it’s time to see if I can’t go slow them down some more,” Jason said.

“I still don’t like letting you go out there.”

“I know. But until I have a spirit domain up and running again, they’re pushing me back in the aura battle. I’m holding on, but I’m slipping and the enemy is getting stronger by the moment. My ghost fire will be more impactful than my aura, but I can’t just sploosh it out like the goddess of Death. Mine is a pale imitation of her miracle. I need to get out there if I’m going to use it, and you know that. It’s not like I’ll be the only one you’re sending out there to make trouble.”

“Risking them is risking a soldier. Risking you is risking everything.”

“And so is keeping me in a box when letting me out could be the difference between victory and defeat.”

Miriam let out a resigned sigh.

“I know. Get moving. Just make sure you come back, and that it was worth letting you go.”