

## Chapter 794

### Overestimating the Length

The main entrance to Jason's mountain fortress was the mouth of Jason's giant stone head. Inside was the central transport hub where three elevating platform shafts were set out in a triangle, giving access to the upper and lower reaches of the complex. Archways were set into the walls all around, one of which held an active portal. Filled with blue, silver and gold light, it led to Jason's soul realm and had been left open continuously.

Jason emerged from the portal with a sandwich and a yawn. He frowned as he expanded his senses over his claimed territory. He shoved the sandwich into his inventory and moved towards the open entrance, quickly building up to a sprint. Reaching the entrance, he leapt out with silver-rank strength that propelled him through the air. He used his aura to make adjustments in his trajectory but carefully, so as to not steal his momentum. He finally landed on the street in the replica of his hometown.

Jali had sensed his movement and followed, soaring on eagle-like wings of brown and white. When she landed beside Jason she found him leaning over the corpse of the priest of Undeath, peering curiously.

"What is this still doing here?" she asked.

"I was just wondering the same thing," he said. "It should have turned to rainbow smoke long ago, but it's just withered. It looks like it's been dead for more than just a few hours."

"This man was a priest of the undeath god, yes? Perhaps he's going to reanimate."

"Which makes me wonder why he hasn't yet. Maybe it's just an enchantment to prevent his body from decaying so his friends can reanimate it when they find him? Necromancers are big into organics recycling."

"Either way, we should destroy the body."

"Agreed."

"What about other undead?" Jali asked. "You said there were tens of thousands of them left and they would be scattered amongst the territories. Why was this guy here but none of his undead?"

"That's another good question. Probably because my aura is anathema to undead and this territory is infused with it. Any undead being placed here may have been ejected or destroyed outright. This guy would have gotten a pass due to being alive."

Jason poked the body with his shoe. He skittered back as the corpse spasmed on the ground.

“You may have been on the money with reanimating,” Jason said. “Are you feeling a draining sensation from it?”

“No, should I be? Do we need to get away from it?”

“I think we’re good. It’s not after life force or mana. It feels like it’s trying to drain something that isn’t there to drain. I think that’s why it’s not getting up.”

The body continued to thrash on the ground as if it were having a seizure. After a short time, it began to dissolve into rainbow smoke, slowly at first but accelerating until all that remained was an empty set of robes.

“That didn’t seem dangerous,” Jali said.

“No,” Jason said. “I could take some guesses as to what just happened, but that’s all they’d be. I hope we find Clive soon.”

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The battle with the Undeath priests was extremely short. On one side was a trio of silver-rank priests commanding around a thousand assorted undead. On the other side were three gold-rank adventurers in Emir, Constance and the Healer high priestess, Hana Shavar. There were also two gold-rank non-adventurers in the commander of the Builder cult, Beaufort, and the brightheart commander, Marla. They commanded a large group of silver-rankers, including Kalif from team Storm Shredder, along with brighthearts and Builder cultists. Clive was also present, but attempts to command him weren’t working out. He had been constantly researching their new environment and he got snippy when people bothered him during his work.

The environment caused significant trouble for the brighthearts who had never seen the sky before. They reacted on a spectrum ranging from excitement and awe to existential crisis. The space around them was filled with thick towering trees into which a large town comprised of tree houses and rope bridges had been built. There were discrete buildings constructed around and into the trunks, as well as sprawling complexes held aloft by multiple massive trees.

The group were all on the ground below where they had dealt with the undead and the priests. The forest floor had been devastated by the battle and a few toppled trees had left the township above damaged as well, pulling down bridges and buildings.

The forest calm that followed the battle with the undead gave the group the chance to rest and for the brighthearts to acclimatise to such an alien environment. The pause did not last, however, as anomalies spawned by the transformation zone moved to the attack.

Humanoids with chihuahua-like heads started streaming from the undergrowth and dropping from the heights above. They registered as gold-rank to aura senses but their

physical prowess was more like high-end silver-rankers and they had no special powers. They posed a challenge for the silver-rankers and the gold-rankers weren't moving to defend. Beaufort and Marla had been about to, but the adventurers stopped them, giving the lower-rankers the chance for growth.

Clive did not participate in the battle. He could sense the unusual nature of the attackers and understood that they were the anomalies Jason had warned them about. He'd made a point of their value in ranking up, early in the transformation zone but there would be plenty more to come. Other opportunities took precedence.

One of the dead Undeath priests lay where he fell, amongst shin-high grass on the forest floor. The other two were less viable for examination. One was scattered liberally over a kilometre of forest while the other had gone into spasms when touched and then dissolved into rainbow smoke.

Clive had a suspicion as to the cause of the seizure and subsequent disintegration of the corpse. This came courtesy of the Healer priestess, Hana Shavar. She had reported an odd sense from the twitching undead before it dissolved, as if it were trying to draw in something when there was nothing to drain.

Hana stood back, observing as Clive pulled out a variety of objects, carefully setting them up around the corpse without touching it. She occasionally tossed a casual bolt of healing energy at the silver-rankers fighting the anomalies, most of her attention on Clive's work. Most of his devices were magical analysis tools, running the gamut from crystal lenses to more elaborate devices with elements that span or floated separately, slowly shifting colours.

A scream drew her attention to the fight and she saw a heavily injured adventurer. Clive glanced over before turning back to his work.

"His name's Kalif," Clive said. "He's one of the key damage dealers in one of those specialised Rimaros teams. He doesn't know how to watch his own back without a dedicated team to protect him. Go save him, and maybe tell him to stand at the back."

"I'm a gold-ranker and you're a silver-ranker. I'm meant to be the one giving orders."

"That's normally how it works, yes."

"If I tell you to do something, will you?"

"Probably not. I'm busy with this."

"Is your entire team like this?"

"No, we have one guy who does what he's told. By his mother."

Hana let out a grumbling sigh.

"I'm going to go heal that man."

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“What’s this?” Hana asked, looking at the quivering rod Clive had pulled out immediately on her return.

“Grab it please,” he said. “I can’t leave it just flopping around in the grass.”

“Then perhaps you shouldn’t have taken it out.”

“I need it to be ready when I go to use it. So, would you please just grab it for me?”

She frowned but put her fingers around Clive’s throbbing shaft.

“I don’t like this sensation,” she said.

“You’ll get used to it,” Clive assured her. “I’ve found that most people come to enjoy how it feels. I think it’s the girth that puts them off at first.”

“I can handle the girth. I’m just not comfortable with it throbbing in my hand like this.”

“Even so, you should just use your hand until you know what you’re doing. Use both hands if you prefer.”

“I think you may be overestimating the length. What even is it?”

“It’s a threshold resonator. I can’t have it too close to the other devices until I’m ready or it’ll ruin their calibration.”

The last thing Clive took out of his inventory was not another magical measuring device but a small lidded pot. It was made of a lacquered ceramic, with the symbol of the church of Purity emblazoned upon it.

“Is that a god’s grace relic?” Hana asked.

“Yes,” Clive said as he dropped it casually into some soft grass, showing none of the care he had for his other equipment. He started making minor adjustments to the positioning of his devices and tossed a recording crystal into the air.

“How did you get that?” Hana asked.

“It’s a recording crystal. I bought it at a shop.”

“No, the relic.”

“While we thought Jason was dead — I don’t know how familiar you are with Jason but he dies a lot. There were a few years where we thought he was dead but he was just in his home universe. I spent a lot of that time mapping a dimensional travel network the Church of Purity and the Builder cult were using. This was after the Ecumenical Council declared Purity a fallen god. Me and a couple of friends spend a lot of time chasing that up until we finally got our full team together for a big operation. Oh, but Jason was still dead so we had a duck guy instead.”

“A duck guy?”

“Yeah, you know. Quack, ponds, being quite comfortable in the rain. Ducks.”

"I know what ducks are."

"Then it's odd you asked for clarification. Anyway, this operation led to us stumbling right into one of their big summoning plans and accidentally setting it off early. This was one of the messenger mass-summons that ended up happening all over."

"Are you talking about the first one? The one near Cyrion?"

"Yes."

"That was you?"

"Yes. Anyway, through that time chasing after the Purity loyalists, I picked up some holy relics here and there. It was a good chance to have a poke around and see how they work."

"The relics?"

"Kind of. The gods, more accurately."

"That's blasphemy."

"Is it? I was never clear on the difference between blasphemy and heresy. The people who yell stuff like that at me always wind up being terrible, so it never seemed worth finding out. And that's saying something because I love finding things out."

"And if the gods take issue and send their servants after you?"

"You say that like I've never killed a priest before. The first priest I ever killed was the archbishop of the local Purity church in my hometown. That was *before* the Ecumenical Council declared Purity a fallen god, but he had it coming. Plus, we'd just dropped a building on him, so it was going to be a fight either way."

"You dropped a building on him?"

"Yes, but he had a solid shield power. Hard to kill, especially being silver rank to our bronze. We took a proper beating, but Humphrey's hard to kill as well. Jason not so much, but the trick with him is in getting the death to stick. It was a year or so after that when I start collecting relics, seeing if I can't figure out how divine power works."

"I still say it's blasphemy."

"Go ahead. After being on my team I could run a lecture series on the praxis of blasphemy. Or heresy, whichever one it is. I'd have to look that up before the first lecture."

"Your team cannot be entirely heretical. Your healer is a priest in my church."

"He doesn't blaspheme," Clive admitted, then tilted his head in thought. "Which is odd, now that I think about it. Neil seems the type. Also, Jason hangs out with gods and I'm pretty sure he convinced Death to use a miracle. I'm not sure he's a heretic so much as a rude acquaintance."

Clive picked up the small pot he'd dropped earlier.

"These are fun," he said. "I never made much headway on the rules of divine influence on magic, but these little pots store a tiny bit of holy power. More an echo of it, really, but even third hand, divine power's not to be dismissed."

"Yet you dismiss the danger of angering the gods."

"My friend Rufus backhanded a priest of Knowledge right across the face once. Now, the way these little pots work is—"

"I know how god's grace relics work, Mr Standish. Even if Purity is fallen, I do not like the way you are treating such objects."

"Are you going to do something about it?"

"Not right now."

"Then I don't care. Now, the great thing about Purity's holy power is that it does all manner of interesting things when you taint it. I had no idea why that worked rather than dispelling the purity power, until it turned out that Purity was the god of disguise this whole time. That way, it makes more sense that the holy power adapts when altered rather than dispersing—"

"Is there a point you're trying to make, Mr Standish."

"No. I was trying to work while the priestess watching me kept asking questions in an increasingly judgemental tone."

"What are you using the holy relic for?"

"I suspect that the Undeath priests have had enchantments placed into them. Possibly engraved onto their bones."

"That's used for punishing criminals by... hold on."

She extended her arm and chanted a spell.

*"Knit the flesh and salve the wound."*

A surge of healing magic washed out of her and off towards the ongoing combat. The other gold-rankers were still letting the silver-rankers take care of it and injuries were accumulating.

"As I was saying," Hana continued. "Engraving skeleton enchantments is for permanently suppressing the powers of criminals."

"There's a lot more potential to the practice than that," Clive said. "It's just incredibly wrong to use it. The process is excruciating and very risky. Did you know that one in four criminals sentenced to it doesn't survive? I don't even think it should be used on criminals. If you're going to kill someone, do it clean and quick. Unless your whole power set is slowly rotting people's flesh off. But do you expect the Church of Undeath to share my misgivings?"

“No,” Hana said. “I do not.”

“Exactly. I think the Undeath priests have been enchanted to rise as some form of undead if they get killed. Maybe just garden variety zombies for the weaker ones, but probably revenants for silvers and golds running around in this place.”

“But they didn’t rise as undead. That one corpse we disturbed...”

They wrinkled their noses as patches of rainbow smoke rose from all around.

“...did that,” Hana finished.

“Someone must have stepped on a finger or something of that third priest,” Clive said. “I’m surprised it took this long. And yes, the Undeath priest corpses are breaking down when disturbed, but what you said sparked an idea.”

“What I said?”

“That they were trying to drain some power that only you could sense. I think what they need is divine power. The god of undeath’s energy is required to animate them, which normally isn’t a problem. But if it is, and that power isn’t available, they break down instead. These territories are dimensionally locked; we can physically pass through the boundaries but magic can’t. Not even that of the gods.”

“None of that explains what you’re doing with that relic.”

“I’m seeing if I can get this corpse to react to divine power. As I said, it’s just an echo of the real thing, but that’s good. I don’t want to go animating this priest by accident.”

“That relic is from Purity. You’ve got the wrong god to try animating the dead.”

“Yes, but I’ll tweak it a bit.”

“Tweak it?”

“I told you I didn’t make much headway on how divine magic works. I never told you I didn’t make any.”

“That’s—”

“Yes, blasphemy, I know. I’m starting to see where Jason is coming from.”

Clive finished placing his devices around the corpse laying in the grass and picked up the pot. He held a hand out to Hana.

“Threshold resonator, please.”

She handed him the rod. He then held the pot over the corpse and waved the rod around it twice before letting the pot go. It floated in the air over the corpse by itself. Clive reached out and removed the lid. White light shone from within the small pot and the corpse sat up, identical white light shining from its eyes. Then its head caught on fire and it rapidly dissolved into rainbow smoke.

“Yeah, I’m fairly certain they need the power of their god to reanimate. Otherwise, they’ll lay dormant until something disturbs them and they forcibly attempt to animate. That’s when they break down.”

“We need to make sure we destroy the bodies when we kill the Undeath priests,” Hana said. “If a live priest finds them, they could be animated into something powerful.”

“No,” Clive said. “We don’t destroy the bodies. We don’t even kill them. We need to start taking them alive.”