

Chapter 822

It Used to Be Completely Dark

The two divine combatants were the unquestionable focus of the battlefield. Looming as tall as houses, they flung powers back and forth. Gary wielded hammers and conjured chains, all wreathed in golden fire. He called up his foundry golem summon, far larger than normal and filled with metal melted by divine fire. The avatar plucked undead from the ground and pallid messengers from the air, melding them into grotesque whips of dead flesh. It grabbed fistfuls of undead and flung them like grenades that exploded with purple fire.

Overall, Gary had a slight edge, but not enough to be definitive. Both were simply too hard to kill, recovering from any damage instantaneously. The adventurers and their allies fought to shift this balance, hunting down the priests of Undeath. Each one that fell absorbed a little of the avatar's power to rise again as a revenant. They were mindless and lacked the magical powers of their previous selves, but were stronger, fearless and extremely hard to kill.

Jason watched Boris as the messenger carved a path through the undead. The weapons in his hands shifted every few blows; a greatsword burst into a cloud of embers that blinded and scorched the undead before reforming into a rapier and sword-catcher. Next was a spear, then a sword-staff, then a pair of flails.

As he fought, he employed other powers, all variations of burning embers. Feathers shot out, burying themselves in enemies and burning them from the inside. Clouds of sparks and ash exploded like cluster bombs, Boris vanishing into one and emerging from another.

There was a grace and flow to the way Boris moved. It wasn't flashy, just profoundly efficient in a way that seemed almost prescient. Enemies moved to the attack just as he moved out of the way; not a dodge but a natural motion, as if they had been swinging to miss. There was no haste in his actions. Boris moved little faster than a silver-ranker, yet was always doing the exact right thing at the exact right time.

Jason had never seen anything like it. Not from Sophie, not from Rufus and not even from Dawn. He didn't know what to make of fighting that treated the world as a partner in a dance to which only he knew the steps. Jason knew that gold-rankers had what amounted to perfect memories, but how many battles did Boris remember? How much cumulative

combat experience did it take to reach that level? Centuries? Millennia? Had Boris spent more time on the battlefield than Jason's homeworld had been recording history?

Not to say that Boris was invincible. He was a messenger, without the vast array of powers an essence user held. He was also a specific kind of fighter. He fought in close, using fire powers to complement his fighting and extend his reach into the mid-range. That put him in a similar role to Farrah, but a deft needle to her crude hammer.

If it came to a fight, they could take Boris down, but it would be a hard, ugly fight. Jason could face off against a gold-ranker with enough buffs, but not a gold-ranker like Boris. That was a place for gold-rankers only, and even outnumbering him, they would pay a price. Jason was very much hoping it didn't come to that.

While keeping an eye on Boris, Jason was not idle. He made his way through the battle, spreading ghost fire and his other afflictions to the undead masses. His role was to thin out the mindless undead and the pallid messengers, who weren't brainless but were far from imaginative.

Given the horde blanketing the ground, Jason was going to need Gordon's butterflies to spread his afflictions. Gordon had been taken out by Garth but was more than just a familiar, now. Gordon's vessel had been reconstituted in Jason's soul space and was again available for battle.

Getting the butterflies to spread in sufficient numbers was easier said than done. Even ignoring all their minions, the Undeath priests outnumbered both the adventurers and Boris' messengers combined. They were also very aware of Jason and the various threats he posed. They understood the weaknesses of the butterflies and his ghost fire and put no small effort into hampering them.

The key to the butterflies was to turn enough foes into factories producing more butterflies. Everywhere that Jason popped up, there were priests ready to wipe out any butterflies they saw, along with any undead or pallid messengers producing them. They had minions enough to spare so long as they could shut Jason down.

Jason remembered back to the messenger invasion of Yareh. For the vast majority of that battle, he'd been running around in a futile attempt to get a butterfly engine up and running. The messengers hadn't allowed that to happen and the Undeath priests were doing the same. During the invasion, he'd tried to avoid the team of messengers tasked with shutting him down. This time he wouldn't make the same mistake.

Emerging from a shadow amongst a cluster of priests, Jason's swordplay felt clumsy after watching Boris. The messenger somehow gave a master class in elegance with what, from anyone else, would have been a frenzied onslaught. While he was dwelling on the

unflattering comparison, the priests were having a very different experience. To them, Jason was anything but clumsy and inelegant.

The priests diligently crushed the easily spotted glowing butterflies, along with destroying any undead producing more of them. The retaliation began when they found themselves surrounded by what looked like void portals, but they moved around like people. These were Shade bodies, draped in the same cloak Jason wore.

Jason had Shade spread his many bodies amongst the priests while conjuring his starry cloak over each one. With all of them moving swiftly, and Jason shadow-jumping between them, it was all but impossible to pick out the real Jason.

The priests started attacking the Shades and Jason alike. Their direct attack magic was quite similar to Jason's, with curses and necrotic magic featuring heavily. This affected Shade not at all, while each attack came with a price for the priests.

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- [Undeath Priest] has attacked your familiar [Shade].
 - Ability [Hegemony] has inflicted [Undeath Priest] with an instance of [Sin].
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The priests weren't completely helpless against Shade. They were masters of the undead, including deathly shadows and ethereal ghosts. Shade wasn't an undead, so not vulnerable to their control, but many had attacks that could harm him. Once they realised what they were dealing with, the priests started to attack his bodies. Shade focused on staying elusive and avoiding their powers, but they did successfully cut some of his bodies down.

It cost Jason a lot of mana to restore one of Shade's bodies. Early in his adventuring career, doing so had taken a lot of downtime, draining most of his mana to replace just one. It was still prohibitively expensive in most cases, but not always. Jason had mana to spare, in vast excess of his normal maximum. He'd drained mana from countless undead throughout the battle, taking him well above his usual limit. He couldn't keep replacing Shade's bodies indefinitely, but in the short term, he could spit them out as fast as they were destroyed.

As for Jason himself, the priests realised that trying to pin him down was useless. They turned to powers that blanketed the area, less powerful but much harder to avoid. A purple miasma flooded the area, covering Jason and Shade, although it had no effect on the familiar.

The necrotic damage ulcerated Jason's skin, but the unfocused attack power was too weak to impede him. It would have gotten worse over time if not for Jason's formidable

regeneration, although the hard-to-heal necrosis did prove persistent. The miasma also carried more insidious effects, but insidious was the wrong move against Jason Asano.

- You have suffered necrotic damage.
 - Ability [Hegemony] has inflicted [Undeath Priest] with an instance of [Sin].
 - You have been affected by [Creeping Death].
 - You have resisted [Creeping Death].
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant] from ability [Sin Eater].
 - You have gained an instance of [Integrity] from ability [Sin Eater].
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- [Undeath Priest] has attacked multiple instances of your familiar [Shade].
 - Ability [Hegemony] has inflicted [Undeath Priest] with an instance of [Sin] for each affected instance.
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Jason noted the affliction with amusement, as it was one he could deliver himself. It wouldn't affect undead, being a disease, but he wouldn't let something like that stop him. The same power he used to inflict it, his shadow hands, also inflicted Weakness of the Flesh. That affliction made even the unliving subject to necrosis and disease, meaning that Jason could turn the power of the Undeath priests back onto them and their unliving minions as well.

Jason did exactly that, loading the priests up with those afflictions and more, consuming any sent his way and turning them into boons that boosted his healing and mana supplies. More afflictions were levied against the priests by the simple act of attacking Jason and Shade.

Jason's aura power left everyone who attacked him or an ally with the Sin affliction, which increased his necrotic damage. With enough Sin, even a small amount of such damage would melt flesh like it was month-old meat left out in the tropics. And, as it happened, Jason had a special attack with no cooldown that dealt a small amount of necrotic damage.

There was a pause in the battle as Jason and the Shades stopped moving. Jason stood, surrounded by a half-dozen silver-rank priests. Wet blood dripped from his sword's black blade onto the red sand of the desert. He looked around at the wary faces of the priests. Signs of necrosis blackened their flesh, even that of the undead one whose flesh was not alive. They variously wore combat robes like Jason or more tight-fitting outfits, suited for combat. They held staves, swords and maces; one even had a scythe that looked impressive but wasn't practical for combat.

"You could run," Jason told them.

"We have faith," one of them said.

“Good,” Jason said. “I have some specific opinions on faith.”

A staff with a glowing purple crystal at the end was swung at Jason. He smoothly dodged around it and counterattacked, resuming the fight. He became a dancing shadow and his sword a black blur. The priests used their full bag of tricks, from dark magic to exploding minions, to little avail. He consumed their afflictions and avoided their blasts, the priests unable to tell him from his familiar.

While he felt awkward comparing himself to Boris, Jason was a shadowy demon to the priests. Every strike he landed split to reveal rotting flesh underneath. Normally the masters of dark powers, Jason’s aura shredded their resistances, more with each instance of Sin that piled up. Jason moved through the priests and their undead minions like a ghost; untouchable, unavoidable and unstoppable.

Some held their faith and fell to Jason’s blade. Others fled and he let them go, as killing priests was ultimately not his role. There were plenty of adventurers doing that, but he was the only affliction specialist on the field.

For all that he had ramped up, loaded with boons that increased his speed, bolstered his healing and left him flush with mana, Jason was not swift at killing. The priests he killed rose as revenants; mindless but swift, fearless and extremely hard to put down. By the time he had dealt with them, more priests were moving in to harass him.

“Miriam,” he said in the command channel. “I’m getting more pressure than I’d like from the priests. I’m practically bait. Can you free up my team to run blocker for me?”

“I need their versatility to handle some of the stranger priest powers,” Miriam said. “If the priests are chasing you that hard, how about we use you as bait? Pull in some priests, start a big clash and let you slip free in the chaos?”

“That’ll do.”

“We’ll start small to try and lure them in by stages. I’m sending Rick Geller’s team your way.”

There weren’t a lot of terrain features in the red desert. A few scraggly plants, some rare patches of yellow grass. Mostly it was the occasional rock casting long shadows in the blazing sun. Jason hid in the shadow of one such rock, in a relatively sparse area of the battlefield that kept spreading over the flat landscape. He found himself again watching Boris and his almost hypnotic skill.

“Garth,” he said to himself.

“Mr Asano?” Shade asked.

“Garth was the key. We’re going to win because Garth wasn’t here to direct the avatar intelligently. For all it’s power, it’s mindless. It has no plan to fight back with, or even the ability to recognise how our plan is weakening it. It’s not a matter of win or lose, now, but how much it costs us. Boris saw that. He knew it from the start and planned the excision of the problem area like a surgeon. We’re all dancing in his palm.”

“What do you intend to do about that?”

“That’s the problem. The best course of action is to go along with what he’s doing. My concern is over what happens when what he wants and what we want stops being the same. Will we have gone too far to do anything about it? Will we even see it coming? Based on what we’ve seen so far, my guess would be no.”

“I believe that you’re overthinking it, Mr Asano. The answer is to do what you always do.”

Jason let out a sigh.

“The best I can with what I’ve got, I know.”

He stepped out of the shadow, getting the attention of a pallid messenger overhead. Jason used his aura to crush the messenger’s and then yank it out of the sky, smashing it into the ground. He conjured his black and red dagger and held it over the fallen messenger. He then jerked the messenger up onto the dagger and then back to the ground, each stab delivering a special attack. At the same time, he chanted a series of spells, delivering even more afflictions.

More undead and pallid messengers were swarming in on him, having noticed his actions. Jason didn’t bother to move, allowing Rick and his team to intercept. They’d been rushing in his direction already and flung out powers at the approaching enemy. A wall of ice, incongruous in the scalding desert, appeared to block some of the enemy. Others were struck with spears or arrows.

One of Gordon’s orbs emerged from Jason’s body and entered that of the messenger bouncing up and down under his dagger. It immediately started shedding butterflies that carried each of the afflictions the messenger was suffering.

“There’s a group of priests heading from over there,” Jason said as Rick’s team arrived beside him. They looked at the beleaguered messenger and then at Jason.

“What?” he asked.

“Your cloak is different,” said Claire Adeah, the archer. “From when we fought you in Greenstone.”

“And it used to be completely dark in your hood,” her twin Hannah said. “I can see the shape of your face a little bit now. Your chin really sticks out.”

“Would you please go fight those priests?” Jason said. “I need to get these butterflies going.”

“They’re pretty,” said Dustin, Neil’s friend and Rick’s frontliner.

“They’re also plague-bearing harbingers of doom,” Jason said.

“Adorable harbingers of doom,” Claire said.

“You know,” Jason said, “I liked it better when I could freak you all out.”

“We’re not iron-rankers anymore,” Rick said. “Now, we’ll go tie up these priests and then you can show us why you’re worth getting dragged across the continent every six months for.”

The battle, in the end, was an inexorable but heavily drawn-out affair. The battle that decided everything was always going to be that between Gary and the avatar, and the avatar lacked the conscious mind to fight it. All it did was attack, driven by the remnant arrogance of the god who spawned it. Even as the battle around it slowly sapped its power, it did nothing but continue the attack. Garth had designated a priest to direct the avatar, but that priest’s authority to do so had died with Garth.

The field saw many epic battles played out. Team Storm Shredder had lost two of their members while regrouping after first entering the transformation zone. They went on a rampage of revenge, cutting down many of the enemy before overextending and being caught out. Half of the team held the line for the rest to escape.

Zara Nareen, the former Hurricane Princess, was reluctantly forced back by Orin, the only member of the team with the strength to make her. They were guided back to friendly lines by the team scout, Rose. She found a way through the enemy throng that had them arriving battered but alive, quickly taken away by the healers. The rest of the team, including the leader, Korinne, fell covering their retreat.

Miriam’s team, Moon’s Edge, was the most powerful force on the battlefield other than the cloud buildings and the two divine entities. Boris was stronger individually, but the teamwork of the gold-rank adventurers outstripped Boris and his subordinate messengers who were not up to his standard.

Jason’s team also acted with distinction, handling the more exotic silver-rank threats. They even took on a few of the weaker, isolated gold-rank enemies. Mostly, this meant the mindless undead, but not always. The team had plenty of experience and the right powers when it came to ethereal enemies, so they took down a shadow-giant priest and his army of undead wraiths.

Team Biscuit also brought about the final demise of Garth, whose revenant Jason had left behind after seeing it was mindless. The gold-rank revenant had none of Garth's powers but was incredibly hard to kill. Jason even rejoined his team briefly, just so his escalating affliction damage could carve through all the corrupted, undead vitality.

As more and more priests fell, it became easier for Jason's butterflies to become a swarm that covered the battlefield like a cloud. Rick's team helped him get started but the pallid messengers proved a large impediment. Swift and alert, more and more of them joined the fight to suppress the butterflies. Like the Undeath side as a whole, however, they fought a slow but losing battle. The more priests fell, the more Miriam devoted forces to covering Gordon's butterflies until they reached a critical mass.

The priesthood as an organised force fell apart, falling into clusters that fought in increasing isolation. Some fled, seeking to escape the battle and find some way to live on. Most realised that there was nothing but more death out there and fought to the bitter end. One of the final priests to die was Jameela, Garth's most trusted subordinate. She refused to go down easy, fighting to the bitter end. Finally, she died, her beauty destroyed by Taika's fists and her unwillingness to accept that her cause was lost.

By the time even the most stubborn enemy accepted that it was over, the sky was hidden under the cloud of butterflies, blazing sunlight replaced with a blue and orange glow. The pallid messengers had no place left in the sky and were all but wiped out. The undead horde was faring little better, the numbers that had seemed so endless were scattered and bedevilled with afflictions.

Only the avatar was still fighting. In death, the priests drained the avatar of power, turning them into revenants. That power was then snuffed out as the revenants were destroyed. Everything that could be taken from the avatar had been taken. Its battle with Gary had become one-sided, the avatar's counterattacks weaker and less frequent. The adventurers and their allies were freed to pile on ranged attacks and massive blasts of power came from the two cloud buildings.

The avatar showed no signs of collapsing under the weight of the attacks. The power that had not been siphoned away was stubbornly refusing to be annihilated. Gold-rankers were extremely hard to kill while diamond-rankers were touching on immortality. Gods weren't killable at all, and though the avatar was little more than an echo, it simply refused to die.

The sky was painted blue and orange with butterflies. At Jason's behest, Gordon directed the millions of butterflies to swarm on the avatar. As if the sky itself were moving, they flooded the avatar, disappearing into it and delivering all the accumulated afflictions

they carried. The sheer number of afflictions was unlike anything Jason had ever delivered to an enemy. It was unlikely he would ever match the number again. Once delivered, all those afflictions kept multiplying, over and over, ravaging the avatar until even a diamond-ranker would have melted.

The avatar did as well, its flesh reduced to necrotic soup, yet it did not fall. Its undead flesh melted and regenerated so swiftly that it looked less like a zombie than some corrupted water elemental. It became a roiling humanoid mass of black liquid, lit from within by swirling purple light.

The avatar became the sole foe remaining from the army of Undeath. A few priests had fled to other territories, taking some scattered minions with them, but most had been eliminated. The red desert was painted with black ichor and decorated in shattered, stained, white bones. The adventurers and their allies had startlingly few casualties, their healers proving their worth. Most of the fallen were brighthearts and Builder cultists.

Miriam and Jason, the tactical and operations commanders, stood watching Gary and the strange liquid avatar. They clashed over and over in a stalemate the adventurers had failed to break, despite how much of Undeath's power they had managed to siphon away.

Adventurers and brighthearts continued to pour out ranged attacks in support. The massive buildings struck it with attacks that had savaged entire battle lines, yet the avatar would not collapse. Jason even turned the countless afflictions into transcendent damage before firing off execute after execute. He wasn't the only one using transcendent damage either, yet the avatar would not fall.

"What do we do?" Miriam asked. "It holds the territories, so it has to die, but it won't. It just won't. How do you kill a god?"

Jason turned to look at her.

"What?" she asked, looking at his expression. "You've thought of something."

"You don't kill gods," Jason told her. "You sanction them."