

## Chapter 799

### Grunts and Sizzling Noises

Neil and Dustin shared a look as the anthropomorphised rabbit paced back and forth over the elevating platform, its low muttering punctuated by regular bleeping sounds.

“This is strange, right?” Dustin asked. “I know that we’re adventurers roaming through a strange unreality after battling an undead army deep underground to win a tree by breaking the universe, but...”

Dustin trailed off and Neil gave him a curious look.

“But what?” Neil asked

“It’s fine,” Dustin told him. “When I say it all out loud, suddenly the rabbit man who makes weird noises when he swears and the giant carnivorous radish aren’t that outlandish.”

“It was a turnip.”

“Look, I love you man, but I need to get back to my own team. Things around you get weird. And it was definitely a radish.”

“It’s not me, it’s bloody Jason!” Neil complained loudly.

“Oh, so you can [bleep]ing well say [bleep],” the rabbit shouted in their direction.

“That’s not even a proper swear word. [Bleep] you, Neil!”

“How does it know your name?” Dustin asked.

“I’m a *he*, not an *it*, Kettering you [bleep]. I identify as the guy that will beat the [bleep] out of you if you don’t show me some [bleep]ing respect. Which will make you the guy who got beaten to death by an adorable mother[bleep]ing rabbit”

“Have you ever considered not swearing?” Dustin asked. “It seems to be making you quite angry.”

“[Bleep] you.”

“Do you know who we are?” Dustin asked him. “Also, what’s your name?”

“How would I know who you are?” the rabbit asked. “I’ve only existed for about a day and the first people I had the misfortune to meet were you two chumps. And no, I don’t have a name.”

“He’s very hostile,” Neil said. “I think I know this rabbit.”

“He just said he’d never met anyone before.”

“But he knows us. I think I’ve seen this rabbit fishing inside Jason’s soul.”

“You do realise that you just said those words with a completely straight face, right?”

“It wasn’t a joke. I really saw—”

“That’s my entire point. I’m starting to understand why Rick always wants to go home.”

“Can we get back on topic?”

“You mean the question of whether the angry rabbit man popped into being with a bunch of knowledge or if he just has rabbit amnesia?”

“Is rabbit amnesia different from regular amnesia?”

“I don’t know, Neil. This is my first talking rabbit.”

“I don’t know what’s going on,” Neil said. “It’s probably memory loss from the transition from whatever he was to whatever he is now. I think he was some kind of spirit construct that couldn’t leave Jason’s soul realm, which is clearly not the case anymore.”

Dustin glanced over at the humanoid bunny. It had stopped pacing and was looking out from the edge of the mesa while absently munching on a sandwich it didn’t have earlier.

“But you believe it’s the same rabbit?” he asked.

“I think so,” Neil said. “There is a way to test it, though. Hey, rabbit. *Airwolf* is terrible.”

“Yeah, no [bleep],” the rabbit said without turning around. “If you put Jan Michael Vincent in a magic room that could only be escaped with a display of nuanced thespianism, he’d starve to death in there.”

“Yeah, that’s Jason’s rabbit,” Neil said. “Rabbit, why do you remember things like our names when you’re less than a day old?”

Expecting another tirade, they instead saw the rabbit turn around. There was a look of unease in his expression, oddly easy to recognise despite his rabbit facial features. He took off his top hat, running the rim through his fingers as he looked at the ground.

“I don’t know,” he said, his voice subdued from its previous aggressive bluster. “I don’t know where I come from, or who this Jason you’re talking about is. I know things I have no reason to know. Your name, Dustin, or that Neil has trouble getting to sleep without his taxidermied piglet. I don’t remember things from before I was here, but it’s like I have the memory of having memories, if that makes any sense.”

“We’ll help you,” Dustin said. “We think we know where you come from.”

“Yeah, I got that much,” the rabbit said, looking up to glare at them. “I’ve got giant [bleep]ing ears remember?”

The rabbit’s expression turned sullen with self-recrimination and his head dipped, not meeting their eyes.

“Sorry,” he said, his voice soft again. “And thank you. I’ve kind of been at a loss up here. All alone, no idea where I am or...”

He cleared his throat in exaggerated, masculine fashion as he jammed the hat back on his head.

“What are you two [bleep]s doing up here, anyway?” he asked, his voice back to normal. “You’re trying to get a look at that battle over there?”

“We are,” Neil confirmed.

“You’d best come with me then.”

The rabbit matched over to the elevating platform. It was an ordinary example of the type, a three-metre circle of metal set into the floor. Like most magic items, it was operated by simply reaching out with mana, control being instinctive. The rabbit sent it descending into the mesa through a shaft of smooth red stone.

Dustin turned to look at Neil as the platform carried them down.

“I’d like to hear more about the taxidermy piglet,” he said.

“No, you wouldn’t,” Neil said.

“I’d say you’re no fun, but I’ve heard about your taxidermy piglet.”

“There is no taxidermy piglet.”

“Are you accusing this sweet, innocent creature of being a liar?” Dustin asked.

“Given that he’s neither sweet nor innocent, and knowing where he comes from, then yes. I’m saying he’s a liar.”

The rabbit held his hat in front of him, trembling as he looked up at Neil from his four-foot height with big rabbit eyes.

“Looking adorable doesn’t get you a pass, rabbit,” Neil said, although he turned his gaze to the wall instead of meeting the rabbit’s.

The platform arrived in a wider room and stopped on reaching the floor.

“There are more rooms below,” the rabbit said, “but this is the one you want.”

The room was circular and large, although noticeably smaller than the mesa itself. This left a lot of supporting stone to prevent the upper reaches from collapsing in, and several support pillars around the room were engraved with magical reinforcement sigils. Around the edges of the room were several stations consisting of a seat in front of a metal box set into the wall and floor. Each box was solid and desk high, with numerous glowing runes on the top and drawers on the side. Set into the wall behind each station was a dark crystal panel.

“They look like the control panels for mirage chambers,” Dustin said.

“Yeah,” Neil agreed, looking them over. There looked to be several different panel layouts, each one repeated at least once. There were eleven stations in total, one of which

stood out from the others. This panel was wider yet had fewer control runes. The screen set into the wall was also bigger than the others, being the size of a large window.

The larger panel was the only one active, showing live images of the battle that Neil and Dustin had come looking for a vantage on. The screen showed a much closer perspective than looking off the side of the mesa, offering a clear view of what was going on. There was no sound to go with it, though, the moving image playing out in silence.

“This is what you were looking for, right?” the rabbit asked.

“Yes, thank you,” Neil said as he and Dustin moved closer to the screen.

“I can turn the sound on if you like,” the rabbit offered. “I wouldn’t bother, though. It’s mostly grunts and sizzling noises, like a porn movie set in a steakhouse.”

“What’s a—”

“Don’t,” Neil said, cutting Dustin off. He stood in front of the station, panning his eyes over the battle taking place.

“Where is the image coming from?” he asked. “Some kind of scrying device on the mesa?”

“No, it’s a series of little drones,” the rabbit said. “Basically just overblown recording crystals.”

“My team uses ones like that,” Dustin said. “They’re expensive. Stealth magic, precision control, extended range. I’m guessing these ones are even more impressive, given the fancy control panels. And the lightning. Even small, they’d get hit by it sooner or later.”

“They’re actually powered by the lightning,” the rabbit said. “It’s an impressive setup.”

“How do you know about all this?” Neil asked.

“I don’t know,” the rabbit said with a shrug. “I just woke up downstairs knowing how most of it works. I’ve just been playing with it all day.”

As they talked, they watched the battle playing out on the screen in front of them. The battlefield was the same lightning-blasted landscape they had spent hours traversing themselves. The scale of the conflict meant there was no careful use of the rods to shield the combatants and lightning bolts regularly struck down into them.

The rough iron poles were scattered across the battlefield, just like everywhere else, but in the thick of the fighting, people got too close. More than once, the trio of observers watched lightning strike a rod only to arc off the pole and hit someone nearby. Unlike non-magical lightning, it seemed more interested in hitting people than obeying the laws of physics.

The lightning wasn't lethal if it hit a healthy silver-ranker, but was debilitating enough to make little difference. Between the severe damage and paralysis it inflicted, anyone struck was soon killed by vindictive enemies or trampled by allies either oblivious or uncaring.

Most of the combatants were messengers, as many as a thousand of them split across three factions. There were also hundreds of undead amongst them. They clashed on the ground, feet churning up the mud. Any that took flight soon found the lightning more interested in them than the iron poles.

The messengers of the three factions were each visually distinctive. The ones that looked closest to normal messengers seemed to have been bleached, their skin pallid and hair a washed-out grey. Their glowing purple eyes were the only pop of colour, even their bland clothing grey and blank. This faction was led by a trio of Undeath priests who were also controlling the undead.

Another faction was comprised of elemental messengers, much like those the expedition had fought through to reach the underground realm. They had less of a maniacal frenzy to them and were commanded by brighthearts. The final and smallest group were led by Builder cultists and their messengers had been bizarrely modified with metal additions to their bodies.

"Are those pasty ones undead or just very unhealthy?" Neil asked.

"Let's check," the rabbit said. He moved to one of the other stations, hopping into a chair so he could access the control panel with his short height. He ran his adorable paw hands over the controls and the wall panel for that station lit up. It showed an example of each of the three messengers with lines of text underneath that neither Neil nor Dustin could read. The two men moved to look.

"I don't know that language," Neil said.

"Neither do I," Dustin added.

The rabbit shook his head with disapproval, hopped off the chair and moved around the metal siding of the control panel. He opened a drawer, took out a rod with a crystal on the end and pointed it at the two men. Light shone from the crystal, washing over the two men for less than a second.

"What is that?" Neil asked suspiciously. The rabbit ignored him, hopping back on the chair and inserting the rod into a hole on the control panel. The text on the screen blurred and reformed, this time in the trade language common to merchants and adventurers the world over. In port cities like Greenstone and Rimaros, it was just as common with the populace as the local tongues.

The text gave details on each of the three messenger types, the details written out in the same style as Jason's interface windows. Neil glanced over the first.

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- Entity: Messenger slave.
  - Affinity: Undeath.
  - Recoverable: Yes. Undeath energy has not created a state of actual undeath. Removing that affinity is survivable but likely to have mental and physical side effects.

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The elemental messengers had a similar entry.

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- Entity: Messenger slave.
  - Affinity: Elemental.
  - Recoverable: Yes. Brightheart association has caused a stable elemental affinity. That affinity could be left intact or excised with minimal side effects.

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The final example was different. While the first two messenger types could pass for normal messengers in very good cosplay, the final type could not. Their bodies had been segmented and were linked together by metal struts and joints, creating macabre figures that moved unnaturally and towered over the other messengers.

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- Entity: Messenger slave.
  - Affinity: Converted (Builder).
  - Recoverable: No. Extreme body modification is reliant on Builder mechanisms to sustain life. Removing Builder control would trigger an automatic shut-down response from life support functions.

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"This is why my messengers all stayed comatose," Neil said. "I don't have anything that can imprint on them like the Builder cult or the Undeath priests. Not while I'm cut off from the Healer."

"You should have taken a divine awaken stone or two," Dustin told him.

"I didn't need them. My family has more money than most, so those are best left to those who can't afford regular awakening stones."

"I didn't realise the gods had a limited supply," Dustin said.

"It's more like a quota they get to use. Like everything with the gods, the limit isn't about how much power they have but how much they can leverage. Using too much disrupts the balance between them and things get dangerous. I'm happy to leave the holy wars in the ancient past."

"An undead army led by priests of Undeath doesn't count as a holy war?" Dustin asked.

“Not compared to the fallen age,” Neil said. “The historical records from that period are so scant because whole civilisations were wiped out. The world never saw that scale of global conflict again. Not until the Builder and messenger invasions, anyway.”

“That would never happen,” the rabbit said. “Religion is super harmless. It never leads to anything bad as contemporary values clashing with those of the archaic belief systems people cling to without truly examining them.”

“Definitely Jason’s rabbit,” Neil muttered.

“If we’re going to fight a religious war,” Dustin said, “we should lump the Builder cult right in with the undead.”

He pointed to the body-horror image of the magic cyborg messenger on screen. “I hate that we allied with those monsters.”

“I think everyone involved agrees,” Neil said. “Even the cultists. But sometimes every choice is bad. The brighthearts had to ally with them or they wouldn’t have survived as long as they did.”

“I know,” Dustin said with a sigh. “We can’t kill them to make ourselves feel better if it means holes in the universe or some kind of undead cataclysm. I’m not sure anyone told this lot, though. They can’t get enough of killing each other.”

They moved back to the large screen where the battle raged on, remaining a three-way conflict. The ostensible alliance between the brighthearts and the Builder cult was not being demonstrated, their messenger slaves fighting each other as much as those of the Undeath priesthood.

It wasn’t just messengers on the field, although they were the vast majority. Each faction had Builder cultists, Undeath priests or brighthearts leading them, issuing commands and participating in the battle.

“That’s a lot of messengers,” Dustin said. “How many do you think?”

The rabbit hopped onto a chair and touched a couple of runes on the control panel. They went from dark to glowing green. On the large panel, each of the figures was outlined, mostly in silver. Some of the undead were marked in bronze, their weakness making it clear that the outlines were an indication of rank.

“That’s useful,” Dustin said. “How accurate is this?”

“Don’t know,” the rabbit said.

“No gold-rankers on any side,” Neil pointed out. “We didn’t get lucky or unlucky.”

“We ended up here instead of in the middle of that fight,” Dustin said. “I think we got plenty lucky.”

Along with the outlines, text had appeared at the bottom of the screen.

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- Total combatants: 1176.
  - Undeath faction: 761 (3 priests, 328 messenger slaves, 330 undead)
  - Brightheart faction: 227 (19 brighthearts, 208 messenger slaves)
  - Builder faction: 188 (9 cultists, 181 messenger slaves)
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The undead had the numbers, and while they only had three priests, each one was a powerful essence user. Their individual impact on the battle outstripped any of their brightheart or cultist counterparts, and while their messengers were proving the least powerful of the three types, they were also the most numerous.

The undead were the weakest combatants on the field, especially the bronze-rankers who were often mowed down incidentally. They were far from useless, however, even if only as shields or distractions. More important was their relation to the three priests whose abilities were tied to the undead. They boosted the weak undead to be more powerful, turned them into ambulatory bombs or sacrificed them for power.

Despite both being on the losing end of the battle, the brighthearts and Builder cultists fought each other as much as the undead.

“What are they thinking?” Dustin muttered. “I get that they hate each other, but even if they weren’t allies, they clearly need to be.”

“They aren’t thinking,” Neil said. “Not clearly. You and I were trained in everything from personal combat to command strategy from when we were children. The brighthearts lived in peace and isolation for generations before the Builder cult arrived. They never had the training in large-scale conflict. They weren’t introduced to carefully chosen battles like we were, objectivity in combat drilled into us. These are people who have seen most of their population slain and turned into fertiliser or undead mockeries. They also don’t seem to have any of their key leaders with them. It’s not hard to imagine them stumbling into a fight like this, where the sky is dark and trying to kill them as much as their enemies. Who wouldn’t lash out in blind rage?”

“We can’t leave it like this, though,” Dustin said. “If the undead win, not only do we then have to deal with them ourselves but we lose a lot of potential allies.”

They looked at the numbers on the screen, declining as combatants fell.

“I just don’t see how,” Dustin continued. “We’re just a pair of silver-rankers. As good or better than anyone down there, sure, but the two of us can’t turn the tide in a battle of a thousand people.”

“We have to convince the cultists and the brighthearts to stop fighting one another,” Neil said.



“In the middle of a pitched battle where they have been and continue to slaughter each other?” Dustin asked.

“It won’t be easy,” Neil acknowledged. “If you have a better idea, I’m open to it.”

“Maybe there’s something in this place we can use,” Dustin said. They turned to look at the rabbit.

“Is there?” Neil asked.

“Sure,” the rabbit said. “Did I not mention we can control the lightning from here?”