

Chapter 819

A Dangerous Power

Garth had a dangerous power. It didn't come from his stolen hearts but was inherent to his nature as a zemravore. He could kill his aura, eliminating it entirely. This made him utterly invisible to aura senses, even those of a diamond-ranker. There simply was no aura to sense. This left him exposed, however, in ways that an aura that was only hidden did not.

Auras formed a natural shield against many powers. Sometimes it was something relatively ordinary, such as telekinesis not affecting enemies unless their auras were suppressed. Other powers were far more sinister and did not work at all unless the aura could be bypassed. Those were the most dangerous, but usually found in the hands of those as insidious as the powers themselves. The adventurers and brighthearts were unlikely to pose such a threat. It was the Builder cultists and potentially the messengers he had to watch out for.

Garth was still angry about the messenger having seen through him. Like every form of undead, a zemravore had both strengths and weaknesses. Garth had taken pains to hide that such a thing as a zemravore existed at all, even from his own people. But messengers lived forever and saw countless worlds. There was no telling the scope of any messenger's knowledge. Garth himself had proven many times that the knowledge accumulated over an ageless existence was not to be underestimated. He did not enjoy being on the receiving end of that truth, but in his long unlife, it was far from the first time.

The messenger's knowledge made using his aura killing power a greater risk than normal. Garth could sense him for now, the messenger not hiding his presence while observing from his mountaintop. But once Garth's aura was gone, his magical senses and ability to track the messenger would go with it. Magical perception was tied to aura projection, so no aura meant no magical senses. He would be reliant on his mundane ones, which would at least retain their outstanding gold-rank levels.

He would not be able to track Asano through aura senses either, but that had already been proven futile. Asano's aura covered everything from the adventurer's defensive point to the plateau, along with the soon-be-a-meat-grinder battleground in between. Any well-trained gold-ranker could hide their presence within a strongly projected aura, and Asano could demonstrably do the same. Whatever Boris Ket Lundi may have lied about, he told the truth about Asano's strength and aptitude for aura use.

Garth moved with the ground army of undead minions, surrounded by those he had animated personally. They were, on average, stronger than the rank-and-file undead. This came from crafting them with care and taking his pick of the superior base meat. There were few basic undead amongst them, mostly a few messenger zombies that he had gotten his hands on satisfyingly intact. Mostly they were custom creations, fusions in which he attempted to get more out of the weaker brightheart bodies by blending them with messengers or monsters.

Garth fit in amongst them, his normal robe replaced with layers of tattered and dirty cloth crudely wrapped around him. With only his skull face showing, he easily blended amongst his creations. Only if someone realised that there was one undead with no aura and looked closer would he stand out.

The minion army moved like a tsunami, crashing into the seawall of the adventurer's defensive line. They had put up surprisingly strong defensive emplacements, probably the work of the brighthearts and their damnable earth-shaping. If they hadn't reinforced the wall to their citadel chamber so well, they would have been overrun before the transformation zone had ever been triggered.

Powers were being flung both ways. Even though Asano's aura had weakened, the adventurers still had the power advantage, all the casualties coming from the undead side. That was nothing new, however. The Undeath priests knew how to use their expendable numbers to bleed an enemy, burning through their mana pools and health potions to leave them exhausted. That was when the mistakes would come. If they were lucky, the enemies would get overconfident at their early advantage and one or two could be baited into overextending for an early kill.

The broader strategy was not Garth's to command, however. Only once Asano was handled and the avatar had returned would he resume control of his forces. He had designated one of his priests to control the avatar for the moment, although the man did not have true control. Only Garth himself had been given that privilege by his god, but he had directed the avatar to follow the other priest's directions for now. It should be enough to prevent the avatar from mindlessly rampaging if it returned while Garth was absent, still dealing with Asano.

To do so Garth was on the hunt. The hope was that Asano would join the battle to make use of his anti-undeath powers, and he did not disappoint. The ghost fire, reminiscent of the damnable white flame of the Death god, had started appearing amongst the undead even before they reached the defensive line. How Asano convinced Death to share even an echo of that power didn't matter for now, and once he was dead it wouldn't

matter at all. For now, the ethereal flame was a signal flare by which Asano marked his position.

It would take more than just that to pin him down, of course. The flames lighting up across the battlefield showed that Asano was jumping around, never staying long enough for danger to find him. Garth was a patient hunter and did not rush; he would need to learn the ways of his quarry before he could make the kill.

In the many years Garth had been killing his own aura, the perception loss that came with it had led him to see things that most people missed. Relying on mundane perception alone, he had realised that aura-based stealth techniques left dead spots, not in the wider aura but in how the people around them behaved. There were certain tell-tale signs in the behaviour of someone whose aura was being manipulated to make them overlook someone nearby. Quirks of body language and odd little movements. It was harder to spot when people were spread out, but in a crowd or a thick melee, it became much easier.

With the flames and watching for reactions, Garth had two references for pinpointing Asano. The ghost fire that he could see across the battlefield and the behaviour he could observe up close. His next step was to start plotting out Asano's pattern and he quickly identified the two chief factors guiding Asano's movement. The first factor was where the defenders needed assistance. When the defence was pressured, ghost fire would frequently start spreading through the attackers, weakening the assault.

The second factor was Asano was acting randomly to be unpredictable. The problem with this was that attempting to be random often accomplished just the opposite. Actual randomness did not match the idea of what was random in people's minds. Even those who knew about this still fell into less than random patterns when their minds were occupied with things like sneaking through an army of undead.

As the flames continued to dot the battlefield, Garth observed that the distribution was more even than truly random. Rather than leaving odd gaps or the occasional concentrated clump, the flames were spread fairly evenly. That gave Garth what he needed to start making predictions. By moving into the larger gaps, he would hopefully, sooner or later, find himself waiting when Asano appeared.

It was a plan that still had long odds, but Garth was willing to play them. He had no doubt that Asano was both sharp and wary, so any more active approach brought more chance of being noticed. Rather than risk Asano retreating to safety, Garth would be patient.

The battle raged on, the undead pushing past the defences one after another. Undead bodies didn't pile high because the priests detonated them like bombs, pressuring the defences all the harder. The infrastructure like bunkers, trenches and spike walls were excellent for having been so hastily, but they were still improvised. One point of weakened defence could easily spread to an entire section.

The pressure on the defence mounted until the tide of unliving seemed on the brink of breaching the defensive line. So long as the line held, the adventurers and their allies had effective defensive formations and could efficiently shuttle the injured to the healers. Once the line broke, the battle would become an ugly mess where the defenders would start seeing casualties.

Everything changed as the two growing mounds of cloud-substance the defenders were protecting solidified into a pair of massive fortresses. The significantly larger of the two was a set of five towers set amongst an area of walls, bunkers and attack platforms that the defenders withdrew into as soon as they appeared. The improvised defences were abandoned in favour of something more structured.

The brighthearts once again proved their work. Those with earth powers had built the infrastructure in the first place, but it was the fire and magma types that destroyed it. As undead overrun the abandoned shelters, those shelters started melting or glowing with such heat that the undead storming through them combusted on the spot.

The massive multi-tower fortress did not stop at defensive measures. Atop each tower was a dome that grew brighter and brighter until it discharged a massive ball of energy. The spheres shot into the approaching horde and exploded in a massive area. Dimming after each shot, the domes immediately started charging for another.

The other fortress was a cloud pyramid, covered in dark-red hexagonal plates. Some of the plates retracted into the cloud stuff, replaced with massive stylised eyes. The eyes shot out beams that came in two varieties. One was thick and shot out with a deep, resonant hum. It cut lines through the undead horde, gouging out trenches and annihilating the unliving. The other beam was much thinner, accompanied by a high-pitched buzz. It struck one undead, and then immediately started chaining through the enemy forces. Each struck undead exploded on the spot, turning the beam into a violent game of connect the dots.

Most of the beams shot from the pyramid were orange, and effective even against the most heavily armoured abominations. It would occasionally shoot out blue beams that proved more effective against the less common ethereal undead. These were mostly the minions of the priest who himself was a shadowy giant.

The appearance of the fortresses also saw Asano's aura restored to full strength, further blunting the undead wave. The timing was perfect for saving the defenders from a costly collapse and the turn in the battle was immediate and clear.

Garth knew that Asano had to be taken off the board *now*. He was beginning to have doubts about his strategy when he got his own lucky timing. Not only was his latest guess at Asano's next destination right but it was exactly right. Asano rose from the shadow of an undead, almost within arm's reach. Asano, being this close, noticed the aura gap that Garth was occupying and turned his attention Garth's way.

Asano wasn't a match for Garth's gold-rank reflexes, although he was startlingly close. Garth was surprised at how fast Asano reacted, but it wasn't fast enough. He reached out, placed a hand on Asano's shoulder and activated the power bestowed by his newest heart.

Miriam said a rude word.

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- Party leader [Jason Asano] has been dimensionally isolated.
 - Party interface and communication functions will continue due to access to the spiritual domain of [Jason Asano].
 - [Jason Asano] cannot be contacted via party chat due to dimensional isolation.
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Miriam had been ducking in and out of the front lines, alternating between commanding the defenders and adding her gold-rank power to the fight. She returned to a bunker made out of cloud-stuff, the defensive structure oddly beautiful with its swirl of sunset colours.

The worst case was Jason dying, making everything else pointless. Dimensional isolation was definitely better than that, but it still wasn't great. She felt Jason's aura vanish from everywhere but his cloud pyramid and the strength of the undead shot up immediately.

Miriam started spitting out orders in response, mobilising assets she'd been holding in reserve. The initial defensive infrastructure was abandoned in places where it had already been compromised, allowing a smoother withdrawal than if the defenders waited for collapse. The sprawling complex of Emir's massive cloud fortress became the new front line when other places had been pushed back. She directed Amos Pensinata to focus on aura attacks, doing his best to disrupt the priests now that Jason was not holding them back.

After putting out the worst fires, she concentrated on what had happened to Jason. Dimensional isolation sounded like the duelling powers used by messengers. The pallid messengers hadn't had that power before, but that wouldn't be the first new ability they'd demonstrated today. But, as they were all silver-rank, challenging Jason was pointless. Even at their full strength he could easily handle one, and their new power had come with an attendant weakness to Jason's undead suppression.

It wasn't hard to detect where Jason had been. There was a near-empty space in the battlefield where most of the undead in it had vanished at the same moment the notification appeared. Only a handful of skeletons and zombies were left standing around before they resumed their charge forward. Pulling back from the front line of fighting, Miriam opened a voice channel to Hana Shavar, the High Priestess of Healer, and Clive Standish.

"Commander?" Clive asked, sounding distracted.

"I don't have time to be deployed elsewhere," Hana said. "The undead just got a lot stronger and the injured are coming in thick and fast."

"High priestess," Miriam said. "You've campaigned against the messengers more than most. Are you familiar with their challenge powers?"

"Yes. Why? We aren't fighting messengers. These pasty-looking ones the Undeath priests claimed can't use that power. Or can they now?"

"I don't know," Miriam said. "Is it possible the Undeath priests found a way to awaken that power in their messenger slaves? Then modified it so that a large group of them could challenge one person?"

"Questionable," Clive said. "Very little is impossible when you really get down to it, but I would count it unlikely. To the best of my understanding, the duel powers are predicated very heavily on the concept of balance."

"He's right," Hana said. "I've never seen a challenge power that could affect anyone of a different rank, let alone multiple combatants versus one."

"Maybe if they found a way to have the ability gauge balance on actual power and not on rank?" Clive postulated. "Perhaps a group of their silver-rank messengers could challenge a gold-ranker together."

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- [Neil Davone] has requested access to the private chat channel.
 - [Clive Standish] has given [Neil Davone] access to the private chat channel.
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"Who is distracting the high priestess when we're already scrambling to heal everyone?" Neil demanded.

"I had a question," Miriam said.

"Is this about Jason and whatever ridiculous thing he's gotten into now?" Neil asked.

"Yes," Miriam said. "I'm deciding how to respond to—"

"You leave him alone, that's what you do," Neil scolded. "It's Jason; he's always going to get locked in an astral space or an underground chamber that's slowly flooding. Or he'll get killed and resurrected in a different universe; it doesn't matter. We don't have time to worry about whatever fool came looking for trouble and is about to get a melodramatic sack full. Jason will do what Jason does, and we need to do what we do. You, priestess, get back to healing. You, commander, get back to commanding and leaving the healers alone."

➤ [\[Neil Davone\] has left the private chat channel.](#)

"He knows we're both higher than him in the chain of command, right?" Miriam asked Hana. "He's lower than you in the church hierarchy as well."

"He's a journeyman priest, so a lot lower," Hana said. "It didn't seem like he especially cared. Also, he's not wrong. If you'll excuse me, commander, I need to return to healing."

➤ [\[Hana Shavar\] has left the private chat channel.](#)

"We're not exactly one of those teams who does what they're told," Clive said, his tone not particularly apologetic. "And Neil is right. We have neither the time nor resources to mount some kind of investigation and rescue of Jason. All we can do now is trust him. If you're that worried, see if Shade is around. He'll know more than anyone else."

➤ [\[Clive Standish\] has left the private chat channel.](#)

➤ [Private chat channel has been closed due to lack of participants.](#)

"Shade?" Miriam asked.

"What can I do for you, Tactical Commander?" Shade's voice came from her own shadow.

"What is happening with the Operations Commander?"

"I am now cut off from communication with Mr Asano and my bodies that are with him, so I can only speak for up until the moment he was sealed away. He was abducted into a dimensional space by an unusual undead. It had no discernible aura, so I cannot confirm its rank. Based on its ability to eliminate its own aura and use a power rarely seen

outside of messengers, I suspect it may have been the Undeath high priest, Garth. Whom I now suspect of being a zemravore.”

“A what?”

“A rare form of undead that can eliminate its own aura and steal powers by claiming the hearts of the living.”

“Claim the hearts of the living?”

“Yes.”

“Is that a metaphor?”

“No, Tactical Commander. It is a gruesomely literal statement.”

“And they use these hearts to use the powers of whoever they belong to.”

“Just the one power per heart, as far as I am aware.”

“But that power could be the duelling power of a messenger.”

“Indeed it could.”

“But the high priest should be gold-rank. How could he use a challenge power on a silver?”

“Zemravores can use the powers they have stolen at their actual rank or a lower one. They mostly use it for schemes that involve leaving deceptive power traces. It's an interesting loophole, and what convinced me that a zemravore is most likely what we're dealing with.”

“Interesting? It means that Asano is locked in a dimensional bubble with a gold-ranker!”

“Yes, but I believe that this situation may have been engineered by someone antagonistic to the high priest. My guess would be the messenger Boris Ket Lundi.”

“What makes you think that?”

“He is the only one who plausibly knows enough about Mr Asano, messengers and zemravores. He also has access to the Undeath priests, given that he and his messengers appear to be residing on that mountain over there. Someone had to convince the high priest to claim the heart of a gestalt physical-spiritual being.”

“Why does that matter?”

“Because the high priest has now used that heart, which means he is about to experience something exceedingly rare for an undead: indigestion.”