

## Chapter 823

### He Likes to Name-Drop

The battlefield was oddly stalled out. Undeath's army was a spent force, the priests dead or fleeing while the remnant undead were mopped up by the adventurers and their allies. Few of the enemy messengers with their pallid, corpse-like skin remained. Most had been killed by the butterflies that had blanketed the sky until they were sent to attack the avatar. Those that remained were being captured alive. Miriam had ordered their forces to do so if possible and safe, out of respect for Jason's sensibilities. The potentially allied messenger forces, led by Boris Ket Lundi, had been trying to take them alive from the beginning.

Most of Gordon's butterflies had been absorbed into the avatar, although it and the few remaining undead were shedding more. Gordon sent them high into the sky before detonating them in a chain of blue lights. They flashed like fireworks signalling victory, but victory could not be claimed until the avatar of Undeath finally fell. Riddled with a literally flesh-melting number of afflictions, it countered with a regenerative strength that only divine power could manage. Under the cycle of liquefaction, it looked like a befouled water elemental.

Jason and Miriam watched Gary and the avatar clash from afar. At this stage, the giant lion man, wreathed in golden fire, was beating down the avatar in a one-sided affair. Even so, the abomination rose over and over, putting up enough resistance that Gary had to maintain at least a little caution.

Scattered across the red desert, the allied forces looked on as well, at something of a loss. Few still had enemies to hunt down; they had ostensibly won and yet the battle was not over. It couldn't end until the avatar fell and Jason claimed the territories it held.

"Sanction," Miriam said. She was echoing what Jason had told her they needed to do to the avatar to finish it.

"That's right," Jason said.

"Isn't sanction some unusual affliction? It impedes healing, right? But it's holy when that sort of thing is usually a curse, wounding or unholy power."

"You're quite knowledgeable for such a niche power outside of your own power set."

"Lady Allayeth trained us well. There are times when knowledge makes a better weapon than sword or spell."

Jason nodded, acknowledging the point.

“You’re right about the sanction affliction,” he told her. “What I’m talking about is a different kind of sanctioning. It’s how entities like gods and great astral beings punish their own kind.”

“We aren’t gods. How are we meant to do what gods do to one another?”

“I have a familiar,” Jason said. “The incantation to summon him is more than a little chuuni, and I never really thought about it that much.”

“Chuuni?”

“Don’t worry about that. The point is, there’s a part of that incantation that I never paid much attention to. I don’t even need it anymore, since I can just call him back up when his vessel is destroyed now. But given the kind of things I get up to these days, maybe it’s time I took another look.”

“I think you’d better just tell me the incantation so I have an idea of what you’re talking about.”

Jason nodded as a cloud of nebulous blue and orange light shot across the battlefield. It arrived next to them and manifested into Jason’s familiar.

“This is Gordon,” Jason introduced. “You’ll have seen each other roaming about, but I might as well give you a formal introduction. Gordon, this is Tactical Commander Miriam Vance, gold-rank leader of team Moon’s Edge. Miriam, this is Gordon, avatar of doom. Also, avatar of me, but let’s not get caught up on the details. What do you say, Gordon? Want to hear the old summoning incantation?”

The orbs floating around Gordon turned blue.

“That means yes,” Jason explained. “Okay, here we go with the incantation: ‘*When worlds end, you are the arbiter. When gods fall, you are the instrument. Herald of annihilation, come forth and be my harbinger. I have doom to bring.*’”

“*That’s* the incantation you used to summon a familiar?”

“Awesome right?”

“Awesome? It sounds like you’re trying to destroy the world.”

“Ironic, I know. Given that saving the world is kind of my thing. And he isn’t even my apocalypse beast familiar.”

“What?”

“Getting back to the incantation—“

“Apocalypse beast?”

“Don’t worry about that.”

“The messengers have been using apocalypse beasts as weapons and you’re walking around with one?”

“See, this is why I asked the Adventure Society to redact that bit from my file. I knew people would get worked up.”

“Worked up? You have a worm swarm apocalypse beast, exactly like the one that just wiped out entire towns.”

The joviality fell from Jason’s face as he and his aura became unreadable. When he spoke, his voice was quiet and forcibly measured.

“You should be careful with your accusations, Tactical Commander. My familiar is not like those things, and was responsible for annihilating no small number of them.”

“You were there? In the towns?”

“My team was included on the scouting expedition. I was the first into one of the villages. I saw the dead being marched around like puppets. I found the growth chamber and the messenger operating it. She died. Her worms died and then the queen producing them died. All at the hands of my familiar. Before you choose to question the integrity of my familiar, Tactical Commander, you should choose your words carefully.”

Miriam looked at Jason. She’d always had trouble knowing what to make of the man and his mix of strange power and stranger behaviour. So often he was overly casual and distractingly absurd. At other times he showed a terrifying and unhesitant aptitude for violence. Here she’d scratched the surface and found something new, something she suspected to be very dangerous.

Suddenly, the moment passed as it had never been and he flashed her a grin, the façade back in place.

“His name is Colin, by the way. Worm swarm apocalypse beast is bit of a mouthful, and not quite accurate. He’s more of a leech-lamprey hybrid. Look, I’ll introduce you.”

Miriam watched as Jason held out his hand and blood seeped from his skin, coating his palm red. A moment later, the thin sheen of blood became a torrent spilling out, coagulating in the air as it formed a pile of creatures on the ground.

Miriam didn’t watch it, her eyes staying on Jason’s face. How much of his behaviour was a mask? It seemed like she’d scratched the surface and seen the reality beneath, but was his seeming struggle for control another layer of artifice?

While she contemplated Asano, his familiar was turning from a pile of creatures into a blood clone, melding together to copy Asano’s shape. The clone went from slick, glossy red to matching the colours and textures of Asano. After a moment, only the eyes were different, the clone’s not changing from glistening red orbs.

“I don’t want to eat any of these dead things,” the familiar said. “Can I eat some of those messengers real quick?”

"No," Jason said.

"Just a couple."

"No."

"What if I promise not to devour every living thing in this pocket universe?"

"You are not helping my situation right now."

"You mean the god?" Colin asked, looking over at Gary clashing with Undeath's beleaguered avatar in the distance. "I'm definitely not going to eat that. Next time you should fight the god of blood or flesh. I'll tuck right in there."

"That's not what I was talking about. And you probably shouldn't go trying to eat gods."

Colin took on a childish, sullen expression, kicking at the red desert dirt.

"I bet if we fought the god of sandwiches you'd eat it," he grumbled under his breath.

"Colin..."

"What?" the familiar asked, lifting his head with a challenging glare. "What did I do wrong? I haven't eaten any babies, even though they're really easy to catch."

Jason sighed.

"I'm sorry, Colin. I know you're always a good boy."

Colin looked mollified and Jason reached out to touch his arm. Colin dissolved back into blood and was drawn back into Jason's hand in a single moment, like water sucked into the vacuum of space.

"Well," Jason said. "That didn't go how I hoped. Anyway, we were talking about the summoning incantation for Gordon, my other familiar."

"What's the summoning ritual for the blood monster like?"

"Probably best I don't say. And I told you to call him Colin. He really is a good boy."

"You realise most people don't need to point out that they don't eat babies."

"Well, in fairness, he didn't say he *doesn't* eat babies. He said he hasn't eaten any babies."

"Isn't that the same thing?"

"Not exactly. It's like me never having gone to Vitesse. It's not that I'm a person who doesn't go to Vitesse, just that I haven't gone to Vitesse. Yet."

"You're saying he's going to eat a baby."

"No, I don't think he's going to eat a baby. Once he starts, he'll probably be eating them in job lots."

"Now I'm going to need you to tell me what's in that summoning incantation."

"I don't even remember it properly. I don't use summoning rituals for my familiars anymore. I have these magic archways in my soul that..."

He sighed again as he looked at Miriam's expression. She clearly wasn't going to let it go and allow him to move on.

"Fine," he grumbled, sounding a lot like his familiar had earlier. "It's along the lines of '*something something, all-devouring power of the final threshold, something something, avatar of life's annihilation.*'"

She wanted to say something but she remembered his warning about disparaging his familiar. However much his mannerisms might be layers of performance, she had believed that threat.

"Alright," she said. "Tell me about your other familiar. Why is its incantation relevant?"

"You heard the second line, right?"

"I did, but we've been rather side-tracked."

"The second line of Gordon's incantation was '*when gods fall, you are the instrument.*'"

"You think your familiar can kill the avatar?"

"Not alone. I have the beginnings of an ill-advised plan."

\*\*\*

Clive and Farrah approached Jason and Miriam, still watching Gary fight the avatar to a goopy standstill.

"Thank you for coming," Miriam said to Clive and Farrah.

"Even if it's completely unnecessary," Jason muttered.

"What exactly is the issue?" Clive asked.

"Jason was explaining—"

"Ah," Clive and Farrah both said, nodding their heads.

"I'm not that bad at explaining things," Jason said defensively.

"Let me guess," Farrah said. "He starts not entirely on-topic, heading in the rough direction of a point as he tries to give context. But in the middle, he offhandedly mentions something ridiculous like getting into a knife fight with the Builder—"

"I was the only one with a knife," Jason interrupted.

"...or killing blood cultists by making them argue about gender roles in the workplace," Farrah continued, ignoring him.

"I don't know what that means," Miriam said, "but that does sound like the pattern I was encountering. Did you both know he has an apocalypse beast?"

"Colin?" Farrah asked. "Yeah, he's a good boy. You can't let Jason distract you with that stuff. He's way too excitable over running down every conversational tangent. And he loves talking about himself."

"I do not," Jason said.

"Jason," Farrah said. "How many times have you died now?"

"That's actually an increasingly tricky topic. I was talking with the goddess of Death recently, and I—"

"Also, he likes to name-drop," Clive said. "What was he trying to explain in the first place?"

Jason called a cloud chair out of the shrunken cloud flask hanging on his necklace and dropped into it with a sulky expression.

"He was trying to tell me his plan to deal with the avatar," Miriam said. "It had to do with his familiar — not the apocalypse beast one — and something called sanctioning."

Farrah looked to Clive, raising her eyebrows inquisitively. Clive frowned in thought for a moment before his eyes went slightly wide.

"You think you can do that?" he asked Jason.

"Yeah," Jason said. "It's all about will, and the god of Undeath's will is locked out of this place. The avatar is just power and the echo of intent. No active will to contend with."

"There's more to it than will, Jason."

"Yeah, but that's what would shut it down. The rest I have covered."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure enough that I'll try. You have an alternative?"

Clive looked once more at the avatar.

"No," he said. "When it comes to the practicalities of handling transcendent enemies, you're the closest thing we have to an expert since everyone that tries it dies. You just have that habit of coming back."

"Would someone care to explain?" Farrah asked. "And by someone, I mean Clive."

Clive looked at Miriam.

"Alright, I'll try and give the quick and simple version. Be aware that much of what we're discussing here is a mix of Jason's personal experience, my studies into cosmically sourced astral magic theory and no small amount of hypothesis. Essentially, guesswork. Confident guesswork, but I'm not willing to make a definitive—"

"We get it, Clive," Farrah said. "Just start, please."

"Right," he said. "Entities like gods and other cosmic beings are essentially made up of magic. This is something you've heard of?"

“Yes,” Miriam said. “I won’t claim to understand it, but I’ve heard people say that.”

“Well,” Clive continued, “the highest order of magic is called authority. This is the magic gods use to perform miracles and great astral beings use to regulate the mechanics of the cosmos. Birthing universes, governing the rules of life and death. You’ll remember that resurrection magic became more difficult a few years ago but healing magic got stronger. This was a large working of authority that would have involved the Reaper, the Celestial Book, the gods of healing and death and probably a few others.”

“Some of us also occasionally use it for home renovation,” Jason chipped in.

“Quiet, you,” Farrah scolded.

“In short,” Clive resumed, “authority is the magic of the gods. And god-adjacent entities. We believe it is called authority because it is, in effect, the power with the highest authority. It has the power to remake everything that is, from the nature of reality to the laws of life and death. The only thing it can’t do is interfere with a soul.”

“Wouldn’t that make it not the highest authority?” Miriam asked.

“I don’t know,” Clive said. “I suspect that a soul is, in itself, a form of authority. One that’s sealed or frozen somehow. Whether through essences or some other magic, we ascend in rank by learning to thaw out or unseal that power.”

“And diamond-rank is when we tap into it fully?” Miriam asked.

“Not even close,” Jason said. “I won’t go into specifics of what I’ve seen and experienced...”

He paused to give Farrah a put-upon look.

“...but diamond-rank is the point where you can truly start to unlock what the soul is capable of.”

Miriam turned her gaze to the avatar again.

“This authority you’re describing. You’re saying that this monstrosity is made of it?”

“Yes,” Clive said.

“The thing about authority,” Jason said, “is that the most powerful beings who wield it do so as naturally as a human breathes. They can do so in a deliberate way if they think about it, but mostly it just happens. They direct it through their will. For most people, will is just a metaphor for determination, mental fortitude and the like. For gods and great astral beings, will is an actual force. But you understand that, don’t you, Miriam?”

Clive and Farrah looked confused but Miriam nodded.

“It’s something gold-rankers develop as part of aura training,” she explained to Clive and Farrah. “It’s not something shared with lower-rankers because it’s possible to awaken at lower ranks through spiritual trauma.”

Clive and Farrah looked at Jason but he remained unreadable in both expression and aura.

"I didn't realise that mortals could develop will as an active force," Clive said. "I barely understand the concept."

"It gets easier once you start tapping into it," Miriam said. "To understand, anyway. Using it effectively is difficult. It's a strange thing. It feels like you can impose your will on the world around you, but you can't. It's like there's something missing. You can only really affect other people and their auras, and even that much is tricky. It's possible to make spiritual attacks if you train it enough, but it's hard to learn and I've heard it feels... wrong."

"It does," Jason said matter-of-factly.

Farrah turned an accusing gaze on Jason.

"How long have you been able to use will like that?" she asked him.

"You know since when."

"You didn't tell us," Clive said. "You didn't tell me, in all the discussions we've had about intrinsic-mandate magic."

Jason stood up from his chair like a king rising from his throne. The air around them turned still and silent as Jason's aura froze it in place.

"No, Clive," Jason said, his voice soft and dangerous. "I didn't tell you. Some things are not for you to research."

"He's right," Miriam said. "The Adventure Society has shut down wildly unethical experiments exploring it. That's why the information is restricted."

The air started moving again, the sounds of Gary and the avatar's battle once more reaching them. Jason's expression softened as he turned to Miriam.

"Will is critical to the use of authority," he explained. "Overcoming someone else's will to interfere with their authority is extremely difficult, but unlike interfering with a soul, not impossible. It's why gods have to team up on one of their number to punish them. Same for great astral beings. It takes an overwhelming amount of will to overcome someone else's sufficiently to use their own authority against them. It can be done, though, and when their authority is used against them, it's called sanctioning."

"And you want to sanction the avatar?" Miriam asked.

"Yes," Jason confirmed. "As I said earlier, it's all about will. I might be able to use will, probably better than you can, but using it against Undeath would be like trying to snuff out the sun with a glass of water. Not only would it be painfully inadequate but I'd be dead long before I'd made any real attempt."

"But the god isn't here," Clive said. "His will is locked out of this place."



"There is a remnant of his will, though," Jason said. "An echo that drives the avatar's basic intentions. Just fighting that echo will not be an easy thing."

"Before we get to that, though," Clive said, "there is the question of how we even set that fight in motion. That's your part, Jason, because I have only the most basic idea of how it works."

"What do you mean?" Miriam asked.

"We talked about authority being driven by will," Clive said. "That's fine if you're a god, but we aren't. Jason, with his domains, is closer than the rest of us, but not close enough."

"He's *what*?" Miriam asked.

"Ignore that," Farrah said.

"Sorry," Clive said. "The point is, using authority, even if we have any, is hard for us. We can't just manipulate it using will."

Miriam noticed Jason's eyes narrow as if he were about to disagree, but his expression went blank again and he said nothing.

"We have to use a special form of magic," Clive continued. "It's called intrinsic-mandate magic and Jason can access it through his familiar, Gordon. We aren't sure how, but that doesn't matter right now. The point is that he can do it."

"I can," Jason confirmed. "I've had Gordon working with an avatar in my soul realm for months to try and understand this kind of magic better. It's still very early days, but I believe I can do this with Gordon executing the actual magic. My job will be employing will to guide the authority."

"There's more to it than just using a special ritual though," Clive said.

"Yes," Jason agreed. "Authority has affinities. Authority is flavoured by the nature of the one that holds it. The Builder's, for example, is about remaking reality, while that of the World-Phoenix is about dimensional forces."

"Why does that matter?" Farrah asked. "Isn't the point of this sanctioning that the authority changes?"

"We can only change it so much," Jason said. "When I stole some of the Builder's authority, I used it to modify the cloud flask and create my astral throne, which is all about modifying reality. The authority I stole from the World-Phoenix I turned into the astral gate, which is about using dimensional and cosmic forces. I think. I'm still getting a handle on it, if I'm being completely honest."

Miriam was looking at Jason wide-eyed.

“What do we do with the avatar’s power then?” Farrah asked. “I’m guessing that Undeath’s authority is quite specific and unpleasant.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “I do have a solution for that.”

“Which is?” Clive asked.

“Well, I was talking with the goddess of death recently, and...”