

Chapter 899

We Need to Put a Stop to It

Jason walked with Clive and Valdis down a tunnel towards the mirage chamber's participant lobby. The passage was cavernous, their footsteps echoing on the blue tiles. Glow stones set into the walls, ceiling and even the floor let off a teal light with a shimmer effect that made the hallway feel like it was underwater.

"This reminds me of the underwater subway back in Greenstone," Clive said.

"Don't change the subject," Jason said. "This is not a good idea."

"It's a great idea," Valdis said. "I can tell because it was mine."

"We have no idea how my avatar will interact with the mirage chamber's soul projector."

"I know," Clive said. "Maybe if someone took five minutes to answer a few questions, we'd have a better idea of what is going to happen."

"Five minutes? I know a lady who can more or less stop time, and even she couldn't get through your questions in five minutes. And if I did give you some time, are you suggesting we'd get around to 'how does your prime avatar affect mirage chambers?' in the first five minutes?"

"We might have," Clive said unconvincingly. "Anyway, it should produce some interesting interactions. I wonder if they'll let me set up some testing equipment in their control chamber."

"Clive was the one who peer pressured me into this. I should be fighting him."

"Proposal rejected," Valdis said. "You couldn't duel worth a damn at iron rank, so I want to see what you've got now. I heard about your duel in Rimaros. They said you dropped your opponent by looking at him and a gold ranker had to step in so you didn't kill him."

"Yeah," Jason said with a sigh. "I'm pretty sure that's why the diamond rankers wanted to check I wasn't a violent madman now."

"Which diamond rankers?" Clive asked.

"Um, all of them, I think?"

"That would explain why my father was asking about you," Valdis said. "I think he loaned me his portal specialist so he can interrogate me about you later."

"Forget that guy," Jason said. "Just bunk off to another universe with me."

"Deal," Valdis said, then looked slightly shifty. "If the wife says yes."

The Yaresh mirage chamber was a lot larger and more involved than the one Jason had used back in Greenstone. There was a nest of control and service rooms, access shafts and mana conduit tunnels, and they were just the magical aspects. Like a sports arena on Earth, most of the attendees would be normal rankers, which meant toilets. Lots and lots of toilets. He had grown used to their absence, spending most of his time around high rankers, so it was jarring to see so much plumbing infrastructure.

Valdis led them to a central participants lobby. This was a waiting area for fighters, and quite like the VIP room upstairs, with a lounge area, bar and huge viewing screen. Some of Jason's friends were down here, having already fought or waiting to go. The local fighters were watching them all like hawks, especially Valdis.

Jason and Valdis circulated for a while, waiting for their turn. The walls in the lobby were artfully painted metal panels, and Clive was intercepted trying to discretely remove one in the corner. Jason left that behind as attendants led him and Valdis down different tunnels towards the projection booths.

"I just don't think we should jump right in without some kind of testing first," Jason explained to the attendant.

"It will be just fine, Mr Asano. We've had Lord Charist himself use this mirage chamber. You're not saying you've got more power running through you than he does, are you?"

"Actually, that's a complex question with no definitive answer, which is kind of the whole point of..."

Jason stopped trying when the attendant closed the door in his face, leaving him alone in the booth. There was no more to it than walls painted dark green, a flat couch and a dim glow stone in the ceiling.

"He's right," Jason told himself. "If it can handle a diamond ranker, one gold rank flesh puppet isn't going to blow the whole thing up."

He lay down on the couch, expecting everything to go black, and his consciousness shift to an illusionary double. Instead, he felt the magic of it settle over him and bounce off. It seemed that Dominion's gift to help Jason contained his presence didn't leave enough for the chamber to latch on to.

He relaxed his control, letting out enough for the chamber's magic to get a read on him. He hadn't done this in a long time and was now able to sense the magic going to work. It also wasn't powerful enough to knock him out. Instead, it split his attention in multiple places, much like when he went 'overseer god mode' in his soul realm. He put his

hands behind his head, lay back and let his attention focus on the replica now standing in the main chamber.

In the mirage chamber's core power distribution node, several artificers were supervising and maintaining the flow of power. The mirage chamber was more than just a spectacle for the populace, also serving as a regulation hub for the city's magical infrastructure. The need to rebuild the entire city had been a chance to recreate it as a unified, efficient and integrated system.

One of the artificers, Munsen, was both new to his position and disgruntled to be in it. At fifteen years old, he was an apprentice artificer. He should have been learning to build sky ships or magic cannons for the walls. Instead, he was stuck in a humid room with a pair of old men.

Munsen blamed his parents, mostly for calling him Munsen. Yes, he understood that an adventurer saved them while his mother was pregnant, but Munsen was no name for an elf. It was a name for someone stuck in a room watching magical readings not change.

Then one did.

Munsen immediately unslouched, sitting bolt upright. His eyes scanned over the panel in front of him, made up of tightly packed crystals. He watched lights trace their way through crystals in complex patterns. His eyebrows rose as he deciphered the light sequences, for while Munsen was a complainer, he was not a slacker. He might be new to the job, but he *knew* the job.

"Bob?" Munsen said, turning to look at the chief supervisor. Names really did curse people into this job.

"I've told you to call me Roberto or Chief Supervisor," Bob said.

"Alright, *Chief Supervisor*," Munsen said. "What does it mean when the mana flow conduit is showing on the board as teal?"

"Teal?"

"Yeah, teal. Blue-green. This one here."

He pointed and the other two crowded around Munsen's chair to see. Bob was in charge, but Munsen had quickly learned that it was Aeoliandor who understood how it all worked. How he'd wound up here despite having a proper elf name Munsen had no idea.

"Look," Munsen said pointing. "There's an ongoing power surge in projector booth seven."

"We need to close that booth before someone uses it," Bob said. "That much power would kill a gold ranker."

“Clearly not,” Aeoliandor countered. “It’s marked as active, with a gold ranker in there right now. But we should get them out, yes.”

Bob wandered towards his office and the communication tablet he had in there. The remaining two continued to watch the board.

“Some kind of accumulator misalignment?” Munsen suggested. “Feeding in too much power?”

“No, look,” Aeoliandor said. “It’s not feeding *into* the booth. It’s coming out. An overflow, slowly spreading though the whole system and imprinting on all the mana.”

“Imprinting it with what?”

“I’m not sure, but we need to put a stop to it. Trigger the emergency shutdown.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Bob had the system removed. He said there shouldn’t be a way to blackout the whole city just sitting around.”

Aeoliandor glared in the direction of Bob’s office.

“It wasn’t just sitting arou... damn it, Bob. Munny, you remember the procedure I showed you for manual shutdown?”

“Yeah, but doesn’t that take a while?”

“Yes, Munsen, it does. That’s why we had an emergency shutdown system.”

The illusionary double of Valdis arrived in the arena first. That wasn’t a surprise as he was well used to the process and Jason had still been complaining the last Valdis had seen him. The prince hoped it really was just grumbling, as he didn’t want to miss this opportunity.

Valdis had always loved pitting himself against well-known warriors. Winning or losing didn’t matter. It was about pushing himself that little bit harder. Stretching his limits a little further. Jason Asano was a rare treat: a specialty Valdis had never faced before. Affliction skirmisher was a rare power set, and a very different beast to a normal affliction specialist. As for what kind of opponent he would make, he couldn’t wait to see.

The randomly selected battleground was disappointingly the same sandy arena he had faced Sophie Wexler in. It was popular as it made it easy for the crowds to see the action, but it advantaged some power sets over others. For Valdis, it was excellent, but it should be the opposite for Asano. His understanding was that Jason’s style favoured complex environments.

Finally, Asano appeared in the opposite alcove. He was still wearing the suit from the party, quickly put together by his tailor friend. Asano looked at him and started walking out, and Valdis did the same. Dark mist shrouded Asano for a moment, and he looked very different when he emerged. He now wore dark red robes, mostly obscured by a cloak unlike anything Valdis had ever seen. He knew Asano had the Cloak of Night ability, and that the look grew more individual to the user as it ranked up. This was the first time he'd seen it look like a portal into some distant, starry void.

Asano's human eyes were gone, replaced with twin nebulas glowing from within the dark hood. He was also not walking, instead gliding over the ground, his feet fully obscured by the cloak wrapped around him. Valdis grinned as they moved closer and drew his longsword.

"Very intimidating," he said. "Too bad about the arena, though. I would have liked to face you in a jungle or something. This open space is perfect for me, so maybe we do best two out of three."

"That's why you'll lose," Jason said. His voice was different, lacking the usual playfulness. Valdis hoped that he had more to offer than just theatrics.

"You think I'll lose because I have the advantage?" Valdis asked.

"You'll lose because you look at the world and think you're the one that needs to change."

Valdis laughed with delight.

"That's the spirit! Ready to go?"

"Proceed."

With no more warning than that, Valdis vanished. He appeared behind Jason, his sword already cutting a horizontal path at Jason's neck. He abandoned the strike when he realised that shadow arms were stabbing out of Jason's cloak like a porcupine's quills, each holding a sinister black and red dagger. Valdis withdrew as Jason slowly turned, letting out a murderer's chuckle as the arms retracting back into his cloak.

"I hope that was just a test," Jason said. "If you're going to be that predictable, this isn't going to take long."

Valdis loved this kind of fight. Hit and run, trading barbs along with blades.

"You think you're disappointed?" he shot back. "What happened to that talk about changing the world?"

"As you wish."

Jason turned his head to the right, then panned it around. Everything that fell into his sight was plunged into darkness as the illusionary sun was blotted out. Not a complete absence of light but a deep twilight where countless shadows careened through the gloom.

Fortunately, it could only impede Valdis so far. The dancing shadows were something real, but no more than blurs in the dark to his vision. His Mind's Eye ability compensated at close range, allowing him to perfectly sense the space around him. At greater distances, he could feel the auras moving around that had to be Asano's shadow familiar.

Less fortunate was the fact that every shadow was duplicating Asano's aura. There had to be well over a hundred of them, maybe two hundred. It was good that this was a new, high-end arena that allowed summoned familiars to be called upon. Older and smaller venues lacked the feature. This suited Valdis just fine, as he wanted to face Asano's full capability. Asano's real body could be any of the auras Valdis picked up, or none of them at all. Making his aura vanish was another trick on the list Valdis was familiar with.

"Nice trick," Valdis called into the dark. "What ability are you using to blot out the light?"

"Midnight Eyes," Jason's voice came from all around in a chorus. "Perception ability. Let me suppress light sources as far as I can see, to the limits of my aura."

"So, if I can suppress your aura, I can turn it off?"

The only response was sinister laughter coming from every direction. Valdis was long past the point of being shaken by theatrics, but there was an unsettling glee to it that felt genuinely unhinged.

Valdis grinned as a jolt of excitement ran through him. His normal duelling strategy was to keep the enemy on the back foot, interspersing quick exchanges with banter, at least in the early stage. The idea was to make the opponent fall into his pace and feel like they were being played with. Controlled. Asano turning the tactic back on him dispelled any lingering disappointment about the arena selection.

Asano was clearly in no rush, either. On the top of the threat list for Asano, at least to Valdis, were his deceptively simple spells. Valdis excelled at deflecting magic projectiles and avoiding area spells, but Asano used little to none of either. His spells had minimal immediate effect, but they just landed. Without powerful resistances, a fully enclosed barrier or a few other niche protections, there was no evading them.

Jason might not be a traditional affliction specialist, but afflictions were still his bread and butter. If he wasn't jumping at the first chance to apply them, it meant that he was toying with Valdis. Rather than be offended, he was excited. If Asano was this confident, he would surely make this an epic clash.

“Have you had enough time to adjust to the dark?” the chorus asked. “Are you ready to start for real now?”

“It sounds like you’re looking down on me.”

“I would never do that,” Asano said, this time only one voice. Valdis focused his attention that way and saw a lighter patch within the gloom. He suddenly could sense which of the auras was real, and saw Asano standing on the spot, casually eating a sandwich.

Valdis almost took the bait. He felt the mana surge inside him to launch an attack, but his instincts pulled him back.

“You won’t get me that easily.”

“No?” Jason asked. He reached out and plucked from the air a half coconut with a straw and a little umbrella.

“No,” Valdis said, but he gave Jason a flat look. “Laying it on a bit thick, aren’t you?”

“Are you kidding? I just picked up fresh ingredients for the first time in years. You feel free to run around in the dark while I eat this and we can talk after you lose.”

It was almost enough to make Valdis lunge at Asano, but he held back from the obvious trap yet again. He took a breath, clearing his mind from Asano’s provocation. Then he swung his sword.

At gold rank, seeker blade fired off a storm of curved force blades that sought out every enemy he could perceive. It was one of his favourites, a precious area attack when he had been limited in that area for so long. One of the blades shot out after Asano and his sandwich, but the real targets were all the other auras in range.

Valdis felt the closer shadow bodies get mowed down, too close to avoid the blades. It was a good start, but most of the other bodies were startlingly effective at avoiding the attack. They could shadow jump freely in the gloom, but teleporting wasn’t enough to avoid the blades. They would simply turn and hunt you down again.

The trick with teleporting was to do so at the very last moment. The blades would explode on striking the target, so pinpoint timing was required. It also required an understanding of the ability, but it was both common and famous, so that was no surprise. The shadow familiar’s precision was uncanny, almost none of the bodies falling after the initial burst. In total, he estimated having felled around a fifth of them.

As for the blade that went for Asano himself, he ignored it and kept eating his sandwich. Four blue and orange orbs appeared around him, one turning into a shield that absorbed the strike.

As the shield turned back to an orb, Valdis saw Jason dip the sandwich into the hood and it came out with another bite missing. As Asano looked back, Valdis couldn't see his expression under the hood, yet he was certain it was a grin. The half-finished snack and beverage vanished into dimensional storage and Jason casually brushed off his hand. Then he looked up at Valdis and spoke.

"Bleed for me."