

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 shift. "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 illusory 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 using to blot out the light?"

"Midnight Eyes," Jason's voice came from all around in a chorus. "Perception ability. Let's 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."

Chapter 900

A Lunatic's Nightmare

The mirage chamber in Yaresh was one of the newest in the world and featured the latest design innovations. Seating was arranged by rank, not because of privilege but because the projections in each section were tailored to different perceptual speeds. When gold rank fighters were just a blur to lower-rank spectators, it required a curated experience of replays and slow motion for them to enjoy the experience.

Jason had seen some of this in the VIP section, finding it startlingly similar to sports coverage on Earth. There were even commentators. That audio hadn't been piped into the VIP room, it had been playing quietly in the participant's lounge.

The projections not only slowed things down but allowed the audience to see through things they normally couldn't, like the darkness Jason had plunged the arena into. While it looked impressive to the naked eye, it wasn't conducive to keeping track of the action.

From the stands, the arena was filled with shifting shadows, dancing like a fire that absorbed light instead of shedding it. Just enough of the arena's illusionary sunlight filtered through to create a perpetual murk. Occasional flashes of purple and orange lit up the dark for fleeting moments, revealing glimpses of disturbing silhouettes.

Inside the darkness lurked dark and alien figures. They had a multitude of arms like the branches of barren winter trees. The limbs jutted up from trunks that were vaguely human-shaped, before twisting down like the legs of a spider. Clapsed in the pointed fingers at the end of each arm were vicious daggers. Ornate workings of glossy red and black, they would not have looked out of place on a sacrificial altar.

The core bodies of the monstrosities were only the size of a person, but they crowded the arena, leaving no space to hide. What had once been an empty ring of sand was now a bizarre garden of horrors, stolen from a lunatic's nightmare and hidden in the unnatural dark.

In the middle of this was the flashing form of Prince Valdis. Like a fabled hero, he dashed through the nightmare creatures, fending off daggers with his gleaming sword. Too fast for almost anyone to follow, only the projections showed his struggles in any comprehensible way.

Valdis was a gold ranker, and he hadn't gotten there by ever letting himself take the easy way. He'd fought monsters and cultists. Hunted down necromancers and soul

engineers. This was not his first time dancing through the madness of some wizard who turned the world around him into a weapon.

Valdis was as orthodox an adventurer as Jason was bizarre. His essences were common; his ability list full of famous, yet basic, abilities. It was not hard to research what Valdis was capable of, compared to the strange ability combinations Jason was unleashing. Even so, others found Valdis extremely hard to beat. Yes, his abilities were simple and predictable, but they were common as dirt for a reason.

Surprise was all well and good, but surprise worked once. Speed, efficiency and versatility worked every time. Valdis was a sword master first, and everything else second. Everything he did was either to advance his training or eliminate an obstacle to that training. If he hadn't found someone he loved in his team, he wouldn't have married because it would have been too much of a time sink.

The result of all this was that Valdis was not intimidated by the terrifying display Jason was putting on. Yes, it was a field of nightmares, but Valdis had slain nightmares before. His mind was razor focused on what to avoid, opportunities to strike, and ameliorating mistakes already made.

It was interesting that he was fighting the very origin of the System to which everyone now had access. It had told him about the mistake he had made in attempting to cut down all of Asano's familiars. Not only had most of them survived, but it had acquainted Valdis with one of Jason's more annoying abilities.

-
- You have sinned.
 - You have suffered 210 instances of [Sin] for attacking [System Administrator] and his allies within his aura. This cannot be resisted, circumventing ability [Sword Soul].
-

The message read as if the afflictions were retaliation for attacking the originator of the system, but that was just how the system referred to Asano. This was a function of Jason's aura ability, afflicting any who came after his allies. Even the normally potent affliction-absorbing power Valdis possessed was unable to stop it, although the affliction alone did little. The issue was how it interacted with Jason's other abilities to reduce resistances and increase necrotic damage.

It wasn't hard to get information on Jason's core abilities. They were much less common than those of Valdis, but Jason had been around long enough, and was famous enough, that many of his powers had been tracked and catalogued. The Sin affliction only

increased any subsequent necrotic damage, not dealing any itself. It meant that Valdis needed to avoid follow-up attacks, but avoiding hits was what he did.

Jason's familiars were almost unrecognisable with twisted tree-branch arms sprouting from them. Unlike trees, however, they were extremely mobile. Valdis was constantly on the move as they shadow-jumped through the gloom, constantly occupying the space he was in. It took more than raw speed to evade them, even with the speed Valdis had at his command. Fortunately, he had no shortage of evasion abilities.

Even amongst orthodox sword-masters like Valdis, each adventurer's power set had its own nuances. Valdis' specialty was force projections. Blade projections helped him attack at range or increase his damage up close, but his real signature was afterimages.

He had a slate of evasion powers that left behind images that, at low rank, had been illusions that made useful distractions. At gold rank, they did so much more. Many of his afterimage abilities now produced full force constructs. Some were dangerous and explosive, a threat to anyone trying to hunt him down. Others were hardy, long-lasting and could even fight on their own.

The crowd was eating the battle up and the commentators played up the dark wizard and shining hero narrative.

"Keep an eye on those replays, folks. At any given moment, our valiant prince seems on the cusp of being taken down, only to escape the clutches of sinister sorcery yet again! And remember, this blink-and-you'll-miss-it action is being brought to you by Barrington's Barrels, the best coopers in Upper Fisker! If you're buying a barrel, you'd best be buying a Barrington's Barrels barrel. Gods bedamned, who writes this crap?"

"Ted, they can still hear you. Putting your hand over the pickup doesn't stop the sound projector."

"What? Oh, sorry, folks, there was a little magical issue with the announcement system there..."

Valdis dashed through the arena, barely a blur as his gleaming swords deflected the rain of daggers stabbing at him from every direction. His raw speed, incredible as it was, wasn't up to the task of fending off the forest of blades alone. His abilities left behind afterimages that would fight back and slow down the pursuing familiars, or even explode and wipe one or two of them out.

The afterimages were key to buying Valdis enough breathing room to devise a counterattack. He was still in a constant state of flight, but he was at least free enough to

consider how to turn the tables. The critical point would be identifying where Jason himself was amongst all the shadows and dagger-wielding tentacle arms.

While Valdis was working to give himself space, Jason wasn't idle, sending out an array of spells. All of the familiars echoed his chanting, so Valdis couldn't trace him by sound. It was also impossible to track his location by aura, when every familiar possessed a perfect replica of it. What Valdis suspected Jason didn't know was that he was already sneaking an extra trick from his sleeve.

The advantage of having such a well-known power set was that people didn't expect to be surprised by it. But, as Valdis had learned, that expectation could kill. While the gist of his power set was a surprise to no one, few people outside his own team knew every quirk and nuance. That was especially true as he ranked up, not just from fresh aspects to the abilities but synergies that people weren't expecting.

Valdis couldn't see through darkness with his perception ability, but it did give him perfect awareness of his surroundings within a short distance. It was the cornerstone of his uncanny ability to dodge and deflect attacks, and perfect for someone needing to track a storm of daggers jabbing in from every angle. What was much less known was that it gave him the same ability to sense the space around each of his long-term afterimages. While it seemed like he was being chased around the arena at random, he was, in fact, building a network of perception nodes.

While this was happening, Jason continued his attack. Spells were flung in Valdis' direction, and even he couldn't dodge every attack from the forest of arms. The cuts from the daggers weren't a threat by themselves, but the afflictions they delivered were a different story.

-
- You have been struck by special attack [Punish] wielded by [Hand of the Reaper].
 - You have been dealt necrotic damage. Damage increased by all instances of [Sin].
 - You have suffered instances of [Sin], [Wages of Sin], [Thief of Spirit], [Creeping Death], [Rigor Mortis] and [Weakness of the Flesh].
 - Your resistances are reduced by the aura [Hegemony].
 - You have failed to resist.
 - Ability [Sword Soul] has absorbed the afflictions, negating them.
 - Capacity of [Sword Soul] has been diminished.

 - You have been struck by [Ruin, the Blade of Tribulation].

- You have suffered instances of [Ruin of the Blood], [Ruin of the Flesh] and [Ruin of the Spirit],
 - Your resistances are reduced by the aura [Hegemony].
 - You have failed to resist.
 - Ability [Sword Soul] has absorbed the afflictions, negating them.
 - Capacity of [Sword Soul] has been diminished.
-

Sword Soul was an extremely powerful defensive ability. Not only did it absorb almost any affliction, but passively buffed his other abilities for any unused capacity. It gave Valdis breathing room against someone like Jason, but he'd never experienced its capacity draining so far or so fast. Many essence users and monsters had a few afflictions, but the rapid depletion of his Sword Soul capacity was more terrifying than all of Asano's theatrics.

There were some afflictions that Sword Soul wouldn't absorb, however. More Sin stacks piled up as the afterimages fought off Jason's familiars. It also didn't stop wounding effects, like Jason's famous bleed attacks.

- You have been struck by special attack [Leech Bite] wielded by [Hand of the Reaper].
 - You have suffered [Bleeding]. [Sword Soul] cannot absorb wounding effects.
 - As you have an existing [Bleeding] effect, you have been drained of health and stamina.
 - You have suffered instances of [Leech Toxin], [Tainted Meridians], [Thief of Life], [Creeping Death], [Rigor Mortis] and [Weakness of the Flesh].
 - Your resistances are reduced by the aura [Hegemony].
 - You have failed to resist.
 - Ability [Sword Soul] has absorbed the afflictions, negating them.
 - Capacity of [Sword Soul] has been diminished.
-
- You have been struck by [Ruin, the Blade of Tribulation].
 - You have suffered instances of [Ruin of the Blood], [Ruin of the Flesh] and [Ruin of the Spirit],
 - Your resistances are reduced by the aura [Hegemony].
 - You have failed to resist.
 - Ability [Sword Soul] has absorbed the afflictions, negating them.
 - Capacity of [Sword Soul] has been diminished.
-

The bleeding and necrotic damage were stacking up, with all the Sin stacks Valdis had taken, but he was gold rank. It would take more than that to slow him down, let alone put him in real danger. The true threat was his Sword Soul running out, at which point afflictions would start landing on him like bricks from the sky. He needed to hunt Jason down before his Sword Soul was expended, but Asano was making himself hard to find.

Jason was almost indistinguishable from his familiars, wrapped in a cloak he turned black and sprouting the same nest of arms. In the gloom, there was no telling the difference, visually. This was where the experience Valdis had built up came into play. As the son of the Mirror King, Valdis was more experienced than most with people using illusions and mirror duplicates to hide themselves.

Using essence abilities was the key to being a good adventurer. Going beyond them was the key to being a great one. Valdis has spent years learning the hard way how to spot the potential tells that differentiated a magician from their clones, duplicates and illusions.

Some made a mistake with disguising their aura, while others left small visible flaws in their disguise that a keen eye could spot. The real experts didn't make such mistakes, however. The secret to teasing out their real location was in watching behaviour, and that was the case for Asano. His aura control was perfect and the gloom covered minor visual inconsistencies. But Asano and his familiars were not the same entity. Even disguised as his familiar, there were subtle differences in the way he moved.

It shouldn't have mattered. Even with perception powers, Asano was so hard to make out that anyone busy dodging daggers in the dark wouldn't notice. What Valdis had learned from hard-earned experience was that the things that shouldn't matter were often the keys to victory. His network of afterimages wasn't just fending off shadow familiars but also letting him watch them.

One of his afterimage variants lasted a long time, making his search for Asano possible. They were turning red, which he'd never seen before, but whatever Asano was doing, it didn't seem to work. The afterimages were immune to most afflictions and weren't being destroyed, and that is what mattered. They let him keep an eye out, and let him spot one of the creepy arm trees moving a little differently than the others. Without hesitation, he pounced.

Part of being an orthodox human essence user was being very focused on special attacks. Valdis had a smorgasbord of such abilities, for killing things in every situation. Some specialised in cutting down spectral monsters, others in cracking armour or

breaching magical barriers. For Jason, he appeared out of nowhere and unleashed his attack for *absolutely killing the damn thing right now*.

Cross Slash was one of the most common attacks in the world. Easily obtained through the sword essence, it allowed for multiple, near-instantaneous strikes. At low ranks, it was a solid workhorse of a move, useful for dropping weaker creatures in a single hit. As things grew much tougher at silver rank, it became a mana efficient means to pile-on damage. At gold rank, however, it became a different beast entirely.

At gold rank, a mana-intensive, long cooldown variant became available. It could inflict countless strikes so swiftly that it bent time itself to do so. It became such a trump card that Valdis had lost his fight with Sophie Wexler when he was gobsmacked at how she countered it. She had accelerated time herself, perfectly blocking each strike with raw skill, then punched him in his astonished face.

That was not something Jason could do. Valdis' sword passed right through Jason's body before he had a chance to react. Through his neck and through his head. Through his limbs so many times they were not just cut off but cut to pieces, all in a single instant. It was so fast that Asano was still standing when he started to fall apart.

Chapter 901

When People See My Powers

Life force was an odd thing. The more Jason rose in rank, the more his body became an arbitrarily shaped collection of blood, flesh and bone. The very concept of life force was increasingly divorced from the condition of his body, becoming more like abstract health points from a game.

The way life force manifested at high levels differed from person to person. For most, they seemed impervious to damage when their life force was high. Their health points were reduced with minimal, if any, injury to show for it. For others, including Jason, it worked differently. Like a vampire, his body seemed almost too vulnerable for its rank, yet instantaneously healed outrageous and seemingly lethal injuries.

Valdis was well versed in the variations of life force. For all the damage he had unloaded on Jason, he knew there was no one-shotting a gold-ranker. The moment his attack landed, he dashed back to avoid dagger-wielding shadow arms. Staying on the move, he unleashed another of his big-ticket attacks, Blade Wave Barrage. As the name suggested, it sent a storm of razor-sharp force waves in Jason's direction.

By the time they arrived, Jason's segmented body had already made itself whole. Strands of blood had reached out, grabbed the chunks of his body and yanked themselves back together as if nothing had happened.

Jason pulled his cloak around himself, appearing as if he were a portal to a starry void. Valdis believed it was nothing but more theatrics until his blade waves shot through the portal and sailed off into the void.

"Wait, *what?*"

In the participants lobby, Emir and Constance were lounging by a projection screen watching the fight and listening to the commentary. He had a beverage in a long-stemmed glass, while she was empty-handed, keeping her mind on her own upcoming fight. Although she had reached gold rank, she had always been a better administrator than fighter. She was nervous about fighting in front of such a large crowd. Emir didn't care, being fighter enough to have long ago learned how to take the losses.

He chuckled when Valdis' attack vanished through Jason, who was apparently now the living portal he looked like.

"I was waiting for that," he said, saluting the projection screen with his glass before sipping from it.

"What was that?" Constance asked.

"That cloak ability of his," Emir said. "Most people think that the gold-rank ability just turns you insubstantial, and it does, but that's more of a secondary effect. What it really does is become an aperture to a dimensional space. I know a guy who likes baiting charge attacks into it. Living things kind of pop back into normal reality, but it messes them up quite badly."

"That sounds strong."

"Very. It's a fantastic ability, but timing and judgement is everything. The mana consumption is apparently heinous, so you have to pick your moments carefully. I've never known anyone who could sustain it for more than a few seconds at a time."

The commentator was likewise astounded by the turn of events.

"What did we just see? Have my eyes gone wonky? Judging by the roar of the crowd I can hear all the way from my booth, I'm going to say no! Our dark sorcerer just turned into *a hole in the universe* that sucked away our hero's attacks! We thought the prince had finally caught the villain by the ankle, but he's once again on the back foot!"

"What exactly is the point of this man?" Constance asked. "We can see what's happening without him explaining things."

"It's about excitement," Emir said. "There's nothing wrong with a little showmanship. Jason understands that very well."

"A little too well," Constance pointed out. "And I don't think this commentator is very good. I think he's meant to be contextualising the curated events being slowed down and displayed, but he's mostly just yelling."

"WOO!" The commentator yelled. "Distracted by whatever we just saw, Prince Valdis is once more fleeing the creepy dagger trees. The crowd is going absolutely wild! It feels like the roof could blast right off the arena. Ted, what did I tell you about coming into the booth while I'm..."

There was some mumbling through which only a few words could be made out.

"...why would maintenance... imprinting on what... you said covering it with a wet towel would..."

"Yes," Emir said. "I think you're right about him not being very good."

The commentator returned, sounding much more subdued.

"Sorry about that, audience. I've been asked to very specifically assure you that the arena is *not* going to blow up. On a completely unrelated note, I'll be taking a short break, during which my assistant, Ned, will be taking over commentary."

"What?"

“Get in here, Ned.”

“I don’t want to, Ted. You heard what they—”

“Get in the damn chair, Ned!”

There were sounds of shuffling.

“Uh, hello. I’m Ned.”

“Gods bedamned, Ned, talk about the action!”

“Oh, uh, Prince Valdis seems to have resumed his attacks on Asano’s real body—”

“Call him the dark sorcerer, Ned.”

“That seems weird.”

“Just do it!”

“Um, okay. Valdis is once more attacking Dark Sorcerer Ned in a series of hit-and-run exchanges—”

“Don’t call him Ned! That’s your name!”

“You said to call him Dark Sorcerer Ned. Everyone heard you.”

“Oh, sweet gods.”

Valdis was getting a handle on dealing with the shadow arms. They were impervious to normal attacks, but his Spectral Slash could easily destroy them. Asano was then forced to recreate them to keep the pressure on in the face of Valdis’ speed. That also cost mana, which was now an important factor. That cloak portal trick could absorb almost any attack, but anything that powerful had to burn through mana like fire in a paper factory.

Asano was adapting in turn, however, using the shadow arms to limit the potential angles of attack. He was also more skilled with the arms attached to his own body, one of which used a sword instead of a dagger. Even so, Asano was taking solid hits on a regular basis. Valdis had a variety of special attacks, letting him mix up trickiness and raw power. He was also just faster. If not for Jason’s absurd regenerative power, the fight may well have been over, but it was like trying to fell a tree that kept growing back.

The potency of Asano’s healing was bad for Valdis, who preferred a more in-and-out approach. He was forced to go on the offence harder, burning more mana and taking more hits himself. If he ran out of mana or Sword Soul capacity before Asano ran out of health, it was over.

Asano pulled out the orbs belonging to his familiar again. Valdis was able to break them down using his array of tailored attacks, but it cost him critical time. He pushed all the harder, and could see Jason flagging as his life force was cut away, slash by slash.

“Munsen, what is happening with the mana imprinting?”

“It’s everywhere, boss. The manual shutdown isn’t working. Unless we physically start hacking apart conduits with an axe, it’s going to do whatever it’s doing.”

“An axe? Those things are built to handle diamond-rank mana flow. Unless you have a diamond-rank axe essence you didn’t mention in your job application, we’re going to need another idea.”

“All out, boss, sorry.”

“At least it doesn’t seem to be volatile, so probably no explosion. That leaves the question of what it is doing.”

“Uh, Ted? What’s that thing on the projection?”

“Is that... the System?”

“Look, it’s got the health and mana of the fighters, that’s handy. Wow, Valdis is low on mana and... what’s a Sword Soul?”

“Yeah, but look at Asano’s health. If he doesn’t do something, this fight will be ending very soon.”

Valdis was looking for an angle for what he hoped was a final push. He would probably have to accept whatever one Asano set up for him and trust his skills to fight through the trap. That was when he realised that Jason had set the trap long ago. Valdis had committed a cardinal sin: fighting against a shadow magician and watching every shadow but his own.

Despite the gloom, there was never a total absence of light. Valdis himself had a shadow, almost invisible in the darkness, but still there. Dagger wielding arms erupted like the tentacles of a kraken, trying to stab and entangle him. It was a testament to his miraculous reflexes that he managed to dodge, weave and parry enough that his last shred of Sword Soul capacity wasn’t snatched away.

Unfortunately, fights were all about stealing the critical moments. Valdis knew well that to win those was to win the fight. With the speed gold rankers were capable of, it was more the case now than when he was lower rank. While Valdis was dodging, Jason was taking the chance to cast one of his slightly longer spells.

“Your blood is not yours to keep, but mine on which to feast.”

That was Jason’s life drain spell, Valdis knew. It would heal him a little, but not much. Valdis couldn’t stop his life force from being drained, but he was the only living thing to target. One person wasn’t enough to...

When red lines started streaming through the dark around him, Valdis had no idea what was happening. There was no way Asano could or would drain the audience. Then Valdis saw what was happening and not for the first time, was taken aback. Valdis was very much about skill and persistence over surprise in combat, but he was forced to admit that surprise had its place.

Jason was draining life from the afterimages that Valdis was using to occupy most of the shadowy arm trees. He had seen Asano turn them red somehow, but now he was actually draining life force from them. That should not have been possible, yet not only was it happening, but it was killing the afterimages. They weren't just dying, either, but drooping in the air like bloody ghosts. That was when things got bad.

Freed of the images keeping them occupied, every shadow tree converged on Valdis, right as he was escaping the attacks from his own shadow. He kept ahead of the attacks, every moment a hair's breadth from defeat as he moved, dodged and deflected with every skill and defensive power at his command. That he could manage it under the circumstances was a little astounding, even to him. But while he was doing this, Asano cast another spell.

"As your lives were mine to reap, so your deaths are mine to harvest."

Once more, streams of life force snaked their way through the dark for Jason to absorb. The bloody ghosts that had been Valdis' force constructs now finally disappeared, whatever magic they had consumed by Jason.

That was when the fighting stopped. The arms stopped pursuing and the familiars backed away. Valdis stood, panting, even his gold rank stamina pushed to the limit. The shadow arms retracted, leaving a crowd of Jason's shadow familiars around them. Only the arms jutting from Jason himself remained, daggers still in hand.

The gloom around them started to break, slowly letting the sun back in. The arena once more became a circle of sand. Jason moved slowly towards Valdis, looking at him with those merciless, alien eyes. In one of the shadow hands was a sword, glowing red runes carved into the black blade. Jason pushed the hood of his cloak back, revealing his face.

"You look spent, swordsman," he said.

"You look fresh."

"That and then some. I've got more health and mana than when we started."

He raised his sword.

"Shall we make a show of it, at the end?"

"You'd challenge me to the sword?" Valdis asked. "Are you looking down on me?"

“Just the opposite. Why do you think I let you push me into this? I’ve spent a lot of time working on my swordsmanship. I want to see how it fares against a true swordsman.”

Valdis nodded and raised his sword, then was on Jason in a blur. They clashed, one sword against a sword and six daggers, Jason’s speed approaching that of Valdis himself. The sword master wasn’t surprised, knowing that this was a trick of Asano’s. If he had fallen foes to drain, he started moving and healing much faster than before. It shouldn’t have been a threat with no dead foes to drain, but Asano had managed it anyway.

The arms Jason used himself were an order of magnitude different to those wielded by his familiar. Those were powers, working on an echo of the true master, much like Valdis’ own afterimages. The daggers and sword clashing with Valdis were something else entirely.

It was a strange fighting style, not bound to the human form. This was what Valdis was constantly in search of: aspects of swordsmanship unlike anything he’d seen before. This was no gimmick, however. As much as anyone, Valdis recognised the fruits of long, hard training. Asano knew well how to make the most of his strange combat style, and was clearly experienced in its use.

The two men clashed across the battlefield at speeds staggering even by gold-ranks standards. The projection slowed the action down, struggling to catch up even with pauses between exchanges. Both men were soon grinning as they pushed the very limits of their skills.

Jason’s inhuman swordsmanship was no shallow trick, but a well-honed style. It suited someone with so many strange aspects to his power set, but that was also the problem. Jason’s approach not just to combat, but adventuring as well, required so many skills that Valdis had no idea how his swordsmanship was this good, but Valdis was a man of the sword alone.

If this was the beginning of the fight, and if this was the way they had fought it, then Valdis would have won. Even dealing with a half-dozen extra arms, he was landing more hits than Asano. But this was not the beginning of the fight; it was the end. Valdis was low on mana, while Jason was flush with health and mana both. Valdis could no longer pull out any big attacks, and Jason just healed through anything else.

The end came when Valdis’ Sword Soul finally gave out. Rather than experience a slow and horrific ugly defeat, he yielded the match.

The magic keeping the sound out dropped and the roar of the crowd crashed over them. People were on their feet, stomping and cheering. Jason turned slowly on the spot, taking it all in with wide eyes.

“Soak it in,” Valdis said, and slapped him on the back. “Never done an arena before?”

“No. Normally, when people see my powers, they run.”

Chapter 902

Listening For Whispers

“Now that I’ve seen you in action,” Valdis said, “I see a lot of potential angles to take another run at you.”

“I hate to break it to you, but I’m not a big arena guy,” Jason said.

They were in the participants lobby, lounging with drinks, snacks and some of their friends who either had fought already or were getting ready to.

“You should rethink that,” Valdis said. “They loved you out there.”

“It was a different experience,” Jason admitted. “I suppose they know that real dark wizards don’t usually show up for spectator fights.”

“And they didn’t see what your powers actually do to people,” Neil added.

Neil was waiting for a healer match against Sigrid. That involved two identical teams of illusionary warriors clashing, with the healers on each providing the difference. It was a slower event than high-ranking combat, and lacked in flash, but it was something that most watchers could observe normally instead of relying on the projections.

Jason looked over curiously at a pair of lobby attendants.

“I can’t believe we’re out again. What’s happening to them all?”

“It’s these out-of-town adventurers,” the other one said. “Here, I’ll take that tray over to the buffet table if you like.”

“Thanks, Mike. When did you grow the moustache, by the way?”

“Oh, it’s new. Do you think it works?”

“Uh... yes?” The two parted ways, ‘Mike’ heading for the buffet table until his colleague was out of sight. He then immediately scarpered so suspiciously he looked like a cartoon bank robber. Over at the buffet table, a local fighter watched him go with a confused expression.

“Where’s he taking all the biscuits?”

“No,” Clive told Valdis firmly. “Jason is not going back into that thing until we figure out what he did to it.

Clive, somehow, now seemed to be in charge of mirage chamber operations. The staff weren’t precisely sure how that happened, but it had involved stabilising the power distribution and whatever had happened to its mana flow. It also involved scathing responses to any questions deemed insufficiently insightful.

"It's fine," Valdis wheedled, more like a child than a gold-rank prince. "Nothing blew up."

"We don't understand how the System managed to imprint itself on the mirage chamber projectors and what the long-term effects will be."

"People love the System integration," Valdis said.

"People love a lot of things that might get them killed, Valdis. I wasn't allowed to cancel the upcoming events, but at least that allows us to monitor what's happening. It would be even better if Jason was here to answer questions instead of sneaking off."

"...and Granny Danielle helped me arrange secretly digging out the underground storage," Stash explained. He was walking down a hallway beside Jason, looking like a more boyish version of Humphrey but with silver hair and eyes. He appeared as his actual age, which was his early twenties. Jason looked much the same, at a glance, which was normal for essence users. People could see the age in them, though, in the way they carried themselves.

"She doesn't mind you calling her Granny Danielle?" Jason asked.

"No, she loves it! Humphrey doesn't, though."

"Why not?"

"He says it's giving her ideas."

Jason let out an easy laugh.

They heard a raised voice through a door as they passed.

"...what do you mean, you're adding Ned full-time? I don't care if the audience 'loved the interplay,' the audience are imbeciles who'll eat whatever we feed them. Have you heard those sponsorship announcements? You know Ned writes those, right?"

Glass towers jutted from the central district of Yaresh. The tallest of them tapered to a point, a flat plate on the blunted tip allowing room for one person to stand. The building itself offered no access, but it offered a vantage from which one could turn and look over the whole city. Doing just that, Jason mused that design was probably not by accident.

"You're in my spot."

Jason smiled, then turned to look at Allayeth. The diamond ranker was hovering in place, wings spread out behind her. The wings had wooden frames and leaves as feathers.

"That's new," he noted. "Item?"

"Yes. Not all of us just start yanking new and strange powers out of nowhere."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

A line of cloud material snaked out of Jason's cloud flask, currently hanging on his necklace as an amulet. The cloud took the form of a floating chair and he sat in it, then waved at his previous perch invitingly. Allayeth drifted over and waved a hand over the flat, round platform on the building's peak. The plate on the tip of the building descended into the tapered roof, leaving a hole. Up through the hole rose a luxurious chair, anchored on a swivel. Jason laughed as her branch wings retracted out of sight and she floated into the seat.

"The city is beautiful," Jason said, and meant it. He had an affection for tree houses, which Yaresh always had, but now everything had been built to a cohesive plan. The housing wards were tightly packed, with rope bridges between decks and platforms. Trade districts were more open, and included more of the local dark grey stone. The river was no longer lined with piers, docks and warehouses, but now featured a swath of parkland on either side.

"Master craftsmen from the skybranch elves spent years helping with the reconstruction," Allayeth explained. "They're a magical variant of elves, much like the brighthearts originated with the smoulder. I helped them once, as you did with the brighthearts, although the threat was nothing so drastic. It was enough that they were very generous with Yaresh, and gifted me these wings when the job was done."

"The results are impressive."

"The changes go beyond simple looks. Utility infrastructure, magic distribution, evacuation bunkers. The defence systems were completely overhauled. Your friend Travis helped with the new city defences. You can't see it now, but if the defensive barrier gets breached, the trees will grow what he called to as 'rotary spear cannons' out of stone and wood."

"I'd like to see that in action."

"I hope you never do. When my home and family were destroyed as a child, the idea of a safe home became quite important to me. My inability to protect it from the messengers troubled me greatly. I was unable to even attempt advancing through diamond rank for many years. Now that it is restored, and more defended than ever, I have finally achieved a measure of peace."

"Only a few diamond rankers involve themselves in the affairs of society, yes? You and Charist here. The Mirror King and Roland Remore."

"Most move unseen, seeking a path to whatever lies at the peak of diamond rank. To me, it's unclear to the point of not being sure it exists."

“It exists.”

“I suppose it must seem straightforward to you, living the life you do. For me, it’s listening for whispers in a storm. Perhaps things will be clearer for you. You seem to have little trouble finding the path, and you are not alone in this. I am young by diamond-rank reckoning, but your generation of adventurers is the strongest I have seen. Not just in how powerful you all are, but in how swiftly you advance. A product of coming up in an age of turmoil, I suppose.”

“There is a curse on the world I come from: May you live in interesting times.”

Allayeth laughed.

“I see. These last couple of decades have been a crucible. The great monster surge, timed alongside the Builder invasion, was just the beginning. The world has been at war with the messengers ever since. They sweep through an area, in search of Purity’s legacy relic. Then they move on. Sometimes they leave behind some of their number to rule an enslaved region. Other times, they leave only ruins, depending on how hard they were fought.”

“How well are they being fought off?”

“Well enough in the core regions. Adventurers and resources are centralised in large population centres, too heavily for the messengers to strike at without massive cost. More isolated regions have been the focus; there are many remote city-states like Yaresh. Vulnerable regions rely on the holy armies raised by the gods and, increasingly, those of nations and city states. Knowledge was preparing her army before anyone knew they needed to, and War did the same in response. Nations and other churches have been copying their example for years, now, but there are only so many essence users to go around.”

“Standing armies were never something this world had, right? Pallimustus has always relied on adventurers.”

“Yes, and adventurers are still the tip of the spear. But they are individualistic by nature, and do not make good soldiers. They don’t like taking orders, and anyone who has been on an expedition knows the challenges that come from wrangling them in large groups. There are not enough to make true armies of them anyway. The problem with using anyone else is that the most basic messenger is silver rank. There is little point sending waves of bronze rankers to die just to eliminate one of them. Those commanders who try have been savagely rebuked.”

Jason let out a sigh.

“I’ve returned to a war, then.”

“Yes. Yaresh has been quiet since the last of the messengers were wiped out. The messengers move like locusts in search of their goal. If they do not find what they want in the more rural regions, they will eventually make more concerted attacks on the cities.”

“I suppose I should go sign up.”

“And you would be welcome. But I think, perhaps, you’ve become so used to being the focal point of events that you forget not everything is about you. This is the world’s war, not yours, and we’ve done well enough in your absence. I know you intend to return home, and you have earned that. We’ll continue doing fine without you, and there will be plenty of messengers to fight on your return.”

“Thank you. I’d invite you to come with us, but Earth isn’t ready for diamond rankers. It barely has the magic for gold rankers, and there are still mana deserts where it’s rough for them to be.”

“It would be fascinating to see, but I still have much to do here. Yaresh is rebuilt, but the surroundings regions are not so far along. We still rely on the brighthearts for much of our food as we establish new farming towns. Getting people to repopulate the existing ones has been something of a disaster, so building fresh ones is proving more effective.”

“It’s easy to overlook what comes next when your job is in fleeting moments of violence and destruction. How hours, even minutes of fighting can mean months and years of recovery.”

“Yes, but those of us who fight have our place as well. Thank you for preventing an unstoppable army of undead from rising out of the ground and flooding my home with death and despair, by the way.”

“It took a lot more than just me, but you’re welcome.”

“You were in charge, Jason. That means you take the credit, even if you sat back helplessly and did nothing.”

“Hey, who have you been talking to?”

Although there was a river running through Yaresh, few of the docks and industrial facilities that once lined its shores had been rebuilt. What remained was all near the downstream river gate, where the water passed under the wall and out of the city.

Memorial Park now occupied most of the shoreline on both sides of the river. Full of open space, greenery and picturesque bridges. The park was dotted with statues, sculptures and memorial walls dedicated to those who had fallen, and those who protected the ones that survived.

Jason found Farrah standing in front of a sculpture of Gary fighting a messenger. Unlike Jason and his team, who had been in the thick of the fighting, Gary had single-handedly led a large group of survivors to safety. They had mostly been craftsmen and manufacturers, and on hearing of Gary's death, they had not only sponsored, but created the display. It showed him roaring in defiance at a messenger, sheltering people behind him.

"Why do they only show him fighting and roaring, like some savage warrior?" she asked as Jason stood next to her.

"This isn't him. Statues are about what people need, not the people they show, and these people needed heroes. Fighters. The man he was, who he *really* was, isn't for the people visiting this park to remember. It's for us, the people who loved him. We're his true memorial, not a statue in a park or a plaque on a wall."

She reached out, hesitant, and brushed her fingers against the stone.

"I can't keep looking at this," she said, then turned and strode away.

Jason followed, a few steps behind, until she arrived at a wooden bench by the water. They sat, letting the sounds of the park wash over them. The sun was high, the sky was clear and there were a lot of families out enjoying the park. Children laughed as they chased small animals into the bushes and parent warned them not to wander too far. Teenagers splashed around in the river, which was clear down to the bottom. The new sanitation infrastructure and lack of river industry had left the water pristine.

"You said you didn't know, but you kind of did," Farrah said after minutes of neither saying a word.

"You know how this works. I have vague ideas at best about what's happening with me. This time it was you and me, but the uncertainty is the same."

"I don't want to be just some attachment to you. Or a slave."

"You know better than that."

"Of course I do, but you're the one with all the power. I'm the one being turned into some kind of magical servant. I'm not your familiar."

"I know that. I like to think that being my familiar isn't so bad, but you aren't some astral being. Your idea of existing is very different from theirs. I would never expect you to see things the way they do."

"What am I, then? Whenever you did... whatever it is that you did, the bond between us got stronger. A lot stronger. My abilities won't advance until I accept this damn thing."

She brought up a system window.

- [Jason Asano] has half-ascended to the status of [Astral Nexus].
 - You are bonded to the [Astral Nexus].
 - You have been assigned the status [Voice of the Will] of the [Astral Nexus].
 - As a [Voice of the Will], you will have access to a measure of power belonging to the [Astral Nexus] while also being subject to its dictates.
-
- Until you acknowledge this role, your status will be in flux, impeding your ability to advance your essence abilities.
-

"It needs to get into my soul, Jason. To change me. It already has enough access through our bond to mess me up. It's holding my advancement to ransom."

"I know. And I'm sorry. You've had to live with this, not knowing if there was any solution while I was out of reach. I was aware of it, on some level, but I couldn't fix it while I was still fixing myself. And I can't do it here, either."

"What do you mean by fix it? Sever the bond?"

"If that's what you want. I'm hoping that I can do better, though. I need to get you into my astral kingdom so I can take a proper look at our connection. If you still trust me enough to go somewhere I have all the power."

"Don't be an idiot. I still trust you. Why did you wait until now to come to me?"

"I've been watching your emotions."

"Through the bond?"

"I can't do that. I've just been peeking with aura senses, rude as that is. And I think you knew that. I've been waiting for you to be ready, and I think that you came here because you are, now."

She nodded, Jason's heart breaking at the fearful hesitation in one of the strongest people he knew. A portal arch of white stone opened in front of them and filled with gold, silver and blue light. He stood up and held his hand out to her. She reached out and took it.

Chapter 903

Defier

Farrah stepped out of the portal onto sand. She was on a beach that ran from turquoise water up to rainforest. A trail went off through the trees and a pier led into the water where a cluster of bungalows sat on stilts. The beach wrapped around a lagoon, sheltering the over-water bungalows. Looking back over the trees, several small mountains were visible, waterfalls spilling off their sides.

Jason stepped out of the portal to join her, the archway then vanishing into the sand. She looked up at the clear sky, feeling the fresh sea breeze take the edge off the sun's heat.

"I feel odd," she said. "Something is... my powers are gone."

"Yes," Jason said.

"But I don't feel uncomfortable, as if they were being suppressed. They're just... not there."

"When I was making this planet, I didn't pay specific attention to every little detail. It was more like creating a seed with certain parameters and letting the laws of physics and magic sort themselves out as it grew. There are a few places I did pay closer attention to, though, and this is one of them."

"A prison?"

Jason let out a wincing laugh.

"That's a little hurtful, after the effort I put in. Does it look like a prison?"

"Then why suppress powers?"

"They're not suppressed. They just don't exist here. This island is named Refuge, and it's what it says on the tin. It's a place where I, and the people most important to me, can get away from all the travails of the cosmos. It's about letting go of the responsibilities that we have to deal with everywhere else. Here, we take things slow. No powers. You'll even find that your speed and strength are capped, if you try to push them. Even my prime avatar is affected."

"I don't know if Sophie is going to like that."

"She'll get over it. Shade has been working on his cocktail game."

"Mixology, Mr Asano."

"Sorry. He's been working on his mixology."

Farrah stared at Jason's shadow.

"Is he never not in there?" she asked.

“Uh...”

Farrah looked at her own shadow, then back up at Jason.

“Just so you know,” he said hastily as he sped up his walking speed, “I’m still working on options to fix our bond. Overmind Jason is, anyway. Prime avatar Jason is still here.”

“Then prime avatar Jason needs a talk about boundaries and where his shadow familiar goes.”

“Ooh, I bet the view from that bluff is excellent,” he responded, speeding up again.

“What happened to taking things slow?” she called after him.

While Jason’s avatar guided Farrah through the rainforest trails, Jason delved into the magic of the bond linking them together. It was distinct from the connections he had with his familiars, where he was the origin of the bond. His connection with Farrah had originated with her ability to bond with people, acquired when she resurrected as an outworlder. It had reacted with the changes in Jason until they noticed the bond and had ultimately chosen to enhance it.

Now that Jason had a vastly powerful transcendent aspect, his power was trying to make use of that bond. And, as much as Jason was loath to admit it, the more tyrannical aspects of his subconscious were trying to subjugate her through it. That was not something he was going to put up with. He explored the magic involved, gaming out possible ways the bond could be manipulated.

While he was doing this, Farrah and his avatar reach the main buildings of the island resort he’d created. The buildings were made from bamboo, wood and natural stone, and set to maximise the feel of a rainforest grove. Several creeks and streams flowed under little bridges and even under the buildings, and a river flowed nearby. Farrah spotted bungalows, indoor and open air lounges, a bar and a games room. In the open-front buildings by the river she saw canoes and what looked like wooden jet skis.

“Jason, this is all very nice, but this is not what I’m here for.”

“I know. I’m working on it.”

“Aren’t you basically a god here?”

“Nothing that limited. But it’s not like they put you through a two-week orientation course when you become half transcendent. I still have a lot to learn, and I can’t afford to make a mistake here. Not with you.”

They made their way deep into the island. Trails of packed earth and fallen leaves gave way to rough-cut stone steps as they began a gradual ascent. Finally, Jason brought her to a grotto half set into a cave. Water spilled down over rocks, into a pool of pristine water, from where it drained off into a little creek. The rocks were flat, and many were

covered in soft-looking grasses and moss. Near the entrance was a gazebo of wood and bamboo, containing a picnic table, benches and a grill.

"I want to bring everyone here, in time," Jason said. "I want this place to be where we come to be together and forget about all the troubles the cosmos sees fit to pile onto us. And I want to start by fixing something that I've put on you, however inadvertently."

"You can fix the bond?"

"I have some options. The power disparity between us is a problem, I won't lie. My power wants to make you obey."

"Then tell it no."

Jason grinned.

"I was thinking the same thing," he told her. "Obviously, making you subject to my will is unacceptable. After looking for some kind of workable compromise, however, I realised that just isn't viable. So, if only extremes will work, I wondered what would happen if we went the other way?"

"Other way?"

A system window popped up in front of Farrah.

-
- The [Astral Nexus] has proposed an alternative to your pending status change.
 - Your available options are [Voice of the Will] and [Defier of the Will].
 - As a [Voice of the Will], you will have access to a measure of power belonging to the [Astral Nexus] while also being subject to its dictates.
 - As a [Defier of the Will] you will have the ability to negate influence of the [Astral Nexus] in various ways. The [Astral Nexus] will be unable to harm you with its power or the magical abilities of its avatars. You will be able to negate the prime avatar and undo aspects of its influence outside of its domains. You will be able to isolate areas within its domains, but not its astral kingdom, from its influence. The [Astral Nexus] will have no ability to undo or revoke your authority to negate its power.
 - As a [Voice of the Will] or [Defier of the Will], you will be immortal. Your body and soul gestalt will not be fully destroyed but will take significant time to remake itself within the astral kingdom. Unlike a [Voice of the Will], you will not otherwise gain the access to the power of the [Astral Nexus].
-

Farrah stared at the window for a long time.

"What is this?" she asked finally.

"We both know that I can lose my way. I'm better, now, but the future is long and uncertain. You've always been the one I could trust when I couldn't trust myself. That's hard if you don't have the power to stop me when I need to be stopped. This would give it to you."

"You have so much power. You can't use it outside of your private universe yet, but some day you will have that power."

"Yes. And you know I've been worried for a long time about not having a check on that power. I'm asking you to be the one that holds me to account."

"Immortality."

"Yes."

"True immortality."

"Yeah. You'll outlive the sun. We can have a sandwich to celebrate."

He wandered over to the gazebo, making his way up the short stairs. A tray of sandwiches was sitting on the table, along with a large pitcher and two glasses.

"Not to pressure you or anything, but there's some iced tea up here as well. It's peach."

"Are you attempting to bribe me into immortality with a light lunch?"

"It's immortality. I shouldn't have to sell it, right? But if you don't like the immortality options, I can sever the bond altogether."

"It feels like this should be more of a conversation. Immortality isn't a small thing."

"No," he agreed, giving her a sad smile. "No, it's not. I only missed fifteen years or so, and that was so long in the lives of my family back on Earth. I never intended to stay away so long. And that's just a drop in the ocean compared to what immortality has to offer. People will live out entire lives while we remain unchanging. We'll love them, for the time they have, and lose them. It won't be a small thing."

"You've thought about this a lot."

"That, and there's a lot of books and TV shows exploring the idea."

"Is it stupid to hesitate at the idea of immortality?"

"Of course not. And that's without even broaching the topic of what this means for you and me. Come up and have a sandwich and we'll hash it out."

Jason, Clive, Travis and the Cloudweaver were in a workshop, in the Yaresh branch of the Magic Research Association. They were seated around a table on which rested Jason's cloud flask. Jason flicked it and smoke started pouring out, black instead of the

usual white. It formed a cloud that filled the room to the high ceiling before it stopped spreading.

Points of light appeared in the smoke like stars in a night sky, silvery lines linking them together in constellations. As more and more stars and lines appeared, it went from constellations to a celestial spider's web to something far too complex and dense to be either.

"Normal so far," the Cloudweaver said as they observed the process. Then their eyes went wide as some of the points started changing colour. The dots of light and their connecting lines started turning blue and orange, slowly at first but rapidly accelerating. They glowed brighter as they went, making the observers lose track of specific points as the light diffused in the black smoke. By the time it was done, it looked like a blue and orange eye, glowing from within the dark.

"Well, it's certainly dramatic," the Cloudweaver said.

"It's Jason," Clive said. "It always works like this. We're lucky the mirage chamber didn't just blast a massive aura projection over the city. Again."

"I'm going to need my tools to get a better look at what's going on here," Cloudweaver said. "Did you say they have a mana spectrum prism matrix?"

"They do," Clive said. "They're bringing it down now. I thought a localised refinement differentiator would be useful as well."

"That's a good idea," the Cloudweaver said.

"That's my cue to leave," Jason said. "It sounds like magic Star Trek in here. Have fun with your deflector dish, and don't get too pokey or the flask will smite you."

Jason got up and walked out, leaving the other three behind.

"He was joking about the smiting, right?" Travis asked.

"Probably," Clive said. "It wouldn't hurt to be careful as we go, though."

Jason left the trio to examine his cloud flask, one of the last tasks before he and his friends packed up to leave. Much of the reunion group had already left, having their own preparations to make before the expedition to Earth. Jason had several stops to make, including rounding up the Earthlings in Estercost and anchoring the link between worlds, which he would do in the Storm Kingdom.

Leaving the main workshop building, Jason headed for a nearby loading area. Normally used for bringing in supplies to the workshops, Humphrey and Neil were preparing a huge pile of goods. Once Jason got the flask back, it would all be loaded into a

cloud vehicle. While heading in their direction, he spotted Danielle Geller and changed course.

"Danielle. We never had a chance to catch up properly."

"It seemed like you were having a busy week."

"Tell me about it. Adventure Society briefings. Parts one and two of the Clive sessions, which I'm assuming will continue until I die."

"Aren't you immortal?"

"Don't remind me. I just convinced someone else to join the immortal club."

"Farrah?"

"Yeah."

"How is she?"

"Asleep. The process of change was one thing, then it was like her halted advancement was unleashed all at once. Half of her abilities advanced simultaneously, which was apparently rough. She's still a step or two from gold."

"But immortal now."

"She'll have time, yes."

Danielle shook her head.

"I remember when Rufus Remore came to visit me in Greenstone, telling me he'd met an unusual young man. And now that young man is casually mentioning how he's made a woman he once resurrected immortal now."

"It was the Reaper on the resurrection, and circumstance on the other thing. It's not like I'm running around, handing out immortality tickets."

"Well, if you do, let me know. There was something you wanted to discuss?"

"Some things I'd like your advice on, if you can spare a few moments."

"Certainly. Shall we take walk?"

"I could show you my universe. It's not as big as some, but I could whip it out right here."

They turned at hearing Neil laugh and saw him pointing at them. A disgruntled Humphrey fished a gold spirit coin from his pocket and handed it over.

"I do believe that you just lost my son a bet," Danielle said. "Probably best not to ask what about."

"Oh, I think I know."

"As do I, sadly. Fascinated as I am to see your own little universe, it might be best to take a regular walk instead of nipping through a portal together."

"I think you're right."

Chapter 904

Vast Cosmic Power Types

Compared to most of Yaresh, the district containing the Magical Research Association campus was heavy on stone and light on trees. It certainly had none of the towering glass of the central district. Located right across the road from the campus was the Alchemy Association's main research centre. The urban planners in charge of rebuilding Yaresh wanted to centralise the places most prone to unexpected explosions, inadvertent poison fog and accidental fire titan summoning.

Both organisations had argued that such stories were — mostly — overblown, but it had made no headway with the planners. Not only did they put the two buildings together but also surrounded them with the blandest district in Yaresh. There were only a few scattered trees, and none of the thick varieties used as part of the buildings. The buildings were all heavy, magically reinforced stone.

There were no houses or shops, only long-term storehouses and other low-traffic facilities that minimised collateral damage risk. That made it one of the least interesting districts for Danielle and Jason to take their walk through. The buildings were largely square and dark grey, with only a few lonely trees to break up the monotony.

While the footpath was made of familiar flagstones, the road, like others in Yaresh, was sealed in some manner of brown concrete. With nothing more interesting to catch his eye, it was what caught Jason's attention. He crouched beside the road to run his fingers across it.

"It looks almost like tree bark in colour, but it feels like regular asphalt concrete."

"Regular?" Danielle asked. "This seems like unusual road surfacing, to my eye."

"Regular for Earth. We don't have a lot of stone-shapers in civil engineering, so this is normal there. I haven't seen a lot of concreting in Pallimustus. This looks more like it was laid the Earth way, though."

He stood up and they continued their way down the footpath.

"Is civil infrastructure an interest of yours?" Danielle asked.

"Sort of. My father is a landscape architect, and you pick things up. I know more about grass than you'd imagine. He did a lot of work in front of government buildings, so he dealt with a lot of driveways. He'd love to see what they've accomplished with Yaresh."

"Then show him. You can take people there, so surely you can bring others back."

"It's not a matter of ability. I intended to bring them last time, but..."

He sighed.

"It didn't work out."

"You're concerned about complications on your return."

"Yeah, but isn't it always like that with family? Especially after a long time away with no communication."

"I suppose so," Danielle said. "Things are a little different in my family. We have essences, to extend our lifespans, and expectations of duty."

She scowled.

"Expectations are very big in my family, which can be a point of pride. But while they can drive someone like Humphrey to greatness, they can crush others beneath them. Your family was unused to the power and longevity that comes of magic, were they not?"

"They weren't," Jason confirmed. "I took them halfway around the world, leaving them with a handful of essence users, a stockpile of essences and a couple of magical cities to live in. Then I disappeared on them. No communication for over a decade. I was able to send them Rufus, but not much else."

"Magical cities? Like Rexion?"

"Yes. They've been living in cities built from my power. Not just *with* my power, but literally made of it. The streets they walk and the houses they live in. And, like in Rexion, there are children who grew up hearing my name but never seeing me. I was a distant and abstract figure, spoken of, but never present. Yet my power was everywhere, like some ancestral ghost. And that power was not always consistent. I had to hide it for a long time, trapping the clan in astral spaces."

"But they are out, now? And you're in contact with them, using your avatars?"

"Now, yes, but most still haven't seen me. And that's not a normal way to encounter a person. Popping in and out of existence, reshaping the world around them on a whim. I'm lucky they didn't see me deal with the vampire city that was over their heads for a decade."

"You don't know how to act when you return properly."

"No, I don't. Magic is still relatively new to Earth, and my power is like nothing else on it. No one knows how to treat me, and I'm unsure how to act. I suppose things were very different for you, coming from a big adventuring family."

"Yes. For mine, power is long established. The trouble it brings comes from the expectations that power brings. Only a fraction of the family become adventurers, and only a fraction of those become high-rank and famous. But there's a pressure on all of us as children, to at least potentially become one of those few. To maintain the family legacy. We're all expected to strive for that until we prove ourselves. Or prove ourselves inadequate. There's little consideration for anyone to want something else until they've

been branded a failure at what matters most. I had a sister who... suffice to say, I am proud of our family and its name, but I do not care for some of the culture we've built up trying to maintain it. Sometimes I wonder if Humphrey wouldn't have been better off as a soft-hearted labour manager in a spirit coin farm."

Jason laughed at the image.

"He'd be such a soft touch as a boss."

"This issue with your family. Not knowing how to act. Am I correct in guessing that this is only peripheral to what you really wanted to discuss?"

"Yes."

"You want to know how to act on a larger scale. Not just with your clan, but with the whole world."

"Exactly. What do I do when I'm the most powerful person on the planet? Turning up with a collection of gold rankers who could conquer the place in a week is extremely political, whether I like it or not. And I am not as adept at politics as I thought I would be before I actually involved myself in them."

Danielle chuckled.

"I remember your antics back in Greenstone. You have a political mind, Jason, and see through more than most. But when it comes to your own designs, you get impetuous. Distracted by ideas that appeal more for their cleverness than their practicality. That is when you get blindsided by consequences."

"Oh, I remember, and I can't afford that this time. This isn't messing with some shady local bureaucrats and a dodgy indentured servitude contract. This is world leaders being scared of a potential tyrant."

"And people take drastic steps when they feel scared and powerless. If I recall correctly, that is kind of your thing as well."

"No kidding. With Earth, I'm heading into a situation that can't really hurt me. If people start declaring war on me or something, though, a lot of innocent people could get caught in the crossfire. Back in Greenstone, I had you and Emir to bail me out when I got it wrong. This time, I'm the high ranker, and the responsibility stops with me. I'll have my friends with me, but it's my world."

"And the power you bring will reshape it, simply by existing."

"Yes. Even if we hide it away and never use our power, people will react to its very existence."

"This is a complicated issue, Jason. A lot more than we could cover on a short stroll, even if I did have an understanding of your world's politics. Which I do not."

"But you understand diplomacy. You understand the kind of power that Earth is only just coming to grips with. Most importantly, I can trust you. The people who already know Earth politics are all on Earth, and most I wouldn't trust to burn if I threw them in a volcano. Which I'm hoping it won't come to."

Danielle laughed.

"You said most you wouldn't trust. Suggesting there are a few you would."

"Not many. There's someone who works for my grandmother now. She would be an asset, but I'd really like to recruit a woman she used to work for, to cover the knowledge of Earth politics I don't have."

"The way you're attempting to recruit me know?"

"Not exactly like this. I thought it might be best to let other people make the pitch to her."

"There's contention between you and this person?"

"It's complicated. The first time we met in person, I broke into her house in the middle of the night."

"Why?"

"To make a point. I'd just been kidnapped by some associates of hers and I was worried about people targeting my family."

"So, you escalated by proving you could target hers?"

"I did say I wanted help with diplomacy, right?"

"I'm starting to see how good an idea seeking out assistance might be for you."

"Yes. I asked everyone if they wanted to come along on this trip, but for most I just wanted to give them a chance to expand their horizons. That's the best part of being an adventurer, right? My intentions for you are a little more selfish, though, yes. I was hoping you might take a role as a political advisor. Not just for the trip, but in the time leading up to it. I need to be preparing now, not just heading for Earth and winging it. Diplomatic training. Strategising over what approach to take. I've already discussed this with Dominion, but I wanted to contrast that with a more grounded perspective."

"What did he suggest?"

"That I either become their king or their god. Neither is a surprising take, given the source, but he made some compelling points."

"How often do you talk to gods?"

"Not that much. Way less than priests, I imagine. And I doubt the clergy have those really tense standoffs, like the one you saw with Undeath. That guy sucks."

"That would be the encounter where you threatened the gods of undeath and destruction."

"I didn't threaten them. I even gave Undeath that gobbet of corrupt energy to get rid of. I just suggested that maybe they want to choose their enemies with more care."

"Their enemies are everyone and everything, Jason."

"Which is an extremely careless approach to take, I think you'd agree."

She shook her head in a very motherly display of exasperation.

"I'm not sure I can help you on the level you operate at, Jason."

"You don't have to worry about the high-end stuff. When it comes to the vast cosmic power types, it seems to be a do-your-own-thing situation. What I need help with is operating without harming the people who someone like me could hurt without even noticing. I don't like the idea of putting myself above people, but pretending I don't operate on a higher level than most will only cause more harm."

"I need to think about this, Jason. You're asking me to take on a lot of responsibility, here."

"Of course. We have some time, although the more of it I use to prepare, the better."

She nodded.

"Tell me more about this person you want to recruit on Earth."

Getting information out of Europe had been difficult for years, but whatever happened in the old Asano territory had kicked a hornet's nest. Vampires were moving on a scale they hadn't been in years. Based on new capture and kill numbers, there were more of them still hidden away than anyone realised.

That, fortunately, was not Anna Tilden's problem. Her problem was representatives from the UN member nations beating down her door about what was going on in Europe. Every nation with a spy plane or observation satellite had been watching the vampires gather in the old Asano territory, only for those observation tools to all get interfered with by an intense magical field that extended into orbit. In the wake of the mysterious event, the vampires had become extremely agitated.

It was bad enough when people were coming to Anna because it was her job. Now, it had gotten around about her having an off-the-books observation team on the ground. Instead of assistants of assistants of deputy liaisons knocking at her door, she had to deal with people she couldn't just brush off. Her blanket denials were starting to wear very thin.

"I'm sorry, Senator," she said into the phone. "Even if there were such a team, any information I could get from them would only arrive when they checked in after the fact. If they existed, they could very easily have died in the incident and we would never know."

It took a while longer to finish the call, continuing to blank wall him like she did everyone trying to strong-arm or wheedle information out of her. Despite taking a grim satisfaction that her claims of not knowing anything were true, she was halfway to hunting down Nigel Thornton herself and choking him to death.

She left her office, which was novel. She'd been sleeping on the couch for five days and having her staff cycle the same three suits through the dry cleaners. She made her way down to the garage, declining the offer of a driver. An office driver might turn around and bring her back, if ordered to by her boss. Inevitably, she got a call halfway home, and while tempted not to answer, she accepted the call by tapping the screen on her dash.

"Secretary Lin, what can I do for you?"

"I need you to come to my office."

"Sorry, Secretary, but I'm already on my way home."

"Then I need you to turn around."

"With all due respect, Secretary, if I go through another weekend without going home and seeing my wife, I'm going to quit and let whoever you get to replace me handle whatever crisis just blew up."

"Anna—"

"Don't 'Anna,' me, Shu-Chen. Don't think I missed that word got around about my people in Europe roughly four seconds after I told you about them."

"That's what we need to discuss. You have to give us more information on—"

"I gave you the information I have, Shu-Chen. If I get more... well, I'll probably keep it to myself. You've got a big mouth and it's not technically — or legally — part of my job. This was a team I put in the field, on my own. No department funds, no department contacts."

"Dammit, Anna, people are thinking Asano's back."

"He might be. I don't know."

"Anna, I'm hearing dangerous things. Rufus Remore announced that Asano was coming back and would more or less do whatever the hell he wanted with the planet, and then this so-called System happened. It's left a lot of people spooked. Powerful people. The things I'm hearing range from nuking France to strange magical crap I don't know whether to believe."

“At this point, it’s safer to believe. Look, I’m hearing things as well, but I genuinely don’t have anything more to add. To be honest, it’s looking increasingly likely that my people got caught up in whatever it was, and we’ll never hear from them.”

“Then your information is out of date. Satellites are operating over France again and I have visual confirmation of Nigel Thornton and his team liberating a blood farm and bringing the people back to territory that appears to be once again under Asano control.”

“Well, they haven’t reached out to me.”

“We know. We’ve been monitoring all your communication channels.”

“God dammit, Shu-Chen. Are you trying to get me to quit?”

“You know you won’t, Anna. You’re too driven to try and make things better, despite all the ugly politics. It’s why you left the Network for us. Who is going to give you a better seat at the table than we can?”