

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 surrounding 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.