

## Chapter 829

### Miracles Work on a Different Scale

The avatar of Undeath in Jason's soul realm wasn't the melting, beleaguered mess the real thing had been when fighting Gary. It stood as tall as a fifteen-storey building, in the fullness of its might. Skinless, red-purple flesh; wounds that showed not weakness but power, purple light shining from within.

Jason's companions had been attacking it by means ranging from the ordinary to the absurd, the messengers piling on as well. Through it all, there had been no sign of the avatar even noticing. From fire to explosions to transcendent energy, neither essence powers nor bizarre tools of the imagination showed any visible impact. Nothing they did could damage it, but they got what they wanted: a reaction from the avatar.

The looming undead behemoth turned to look around, purple light blazing from empty eye sockets. It took in the giant distaff Clive and the robot made from cheap toy plastic. It didn't blink at the humungous moustachioed Humphrey, naked but for a sandwich board, or the swarm of smaller combatants scattered around it like insects.

The aura of the god of Undeath crashed over everything like a tsunami. The raw potency of it washed away the expressions of will being used to attack the avatar. Essence powers faltered; Mrs Clive and vehicle Voltron vanished, along with Clive's ritual circles that had, moments earlier, filled the sky. Stash was returned to his natural form of an elephant-sized dragon with iridescent rainbow scales. The Tina Turner music stopped blaring and those flying suddenly found themselves falling.

The avatar reached out for the largest of its falling enemies, Stash, moving quickly for its massive size. It grasped only air as thunder went off like a bomb, rocking the avatar back while leaving everyone else untouched. The thunder sounded out a word that shook the air, rumbling but unmistakable.

**NO.**

The avatar recovered and grasped at Stash a second time. A cloud of sparkling light appeared around the avatar's hand, completely arresting its motion. Although the cloud seemed thin, just motes of blue and orange light, the hand would not shift. As the avatar tugged its arm helplessly, more clouds appeared to catch the falling people and deliver them gently to the ground.

The cloud holding the avatar's hand did not budge, no matter how much the avatar yanked at it. It finally pulled its arm free when the undead flesh tore apart, severing the arm at the wrist. Light sprayed from the stump in fits and starts, like spurting blood. The

hand, still inside the cloud, was bleached to a sickly grey. Leached of colour, it burst into ethereal white flame.

On the ground, Jason's companions and their messenger allies were regrouping, recovering after being blasted by the avatar's aura. That aura had been pushed back hard from the moment the peal of thunder had echoed through the sky. Without it pressing on their minds, they could once again muster up the will to fight.

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"Are we winning?" Neil asked as a trebuchet wheeled up next to him. "Getting a reaction is what we wanted, right? I'm assuming those clouds are Jason getting in on the fight."

"They are," Shade confirmed. "Mr Asano seems to have resumed converting the power of Undeath for his own ends. The question of whether he will succeed remains unanswered. My connection to him and my fellow familiars feels very odd right now and I am uncertain as to their conditions. I recommend continuing to distract the avatar."

"On it," Neil said. "This whole thing is bizarre."

"Yeah," Clive said, watching Neil pick up a van-sized bundle of Jason clones, squished together inside a net. "That's what's strange here."

Neil loaded the ball of Jason's into the trebuchet and pulled a lever. The trebuchet rocked as it flung the Jasons who let out squeals of terror until they splattered against the avatar.

"I'm not going to lie," Neil said. "This day is going much better than I expected."

"Neil," Clive said. "People have died today."

"Yeah, but not many, given the circumstances. Can you honestly say you expected casualties to be this low?"

"No," Clive admitted.

"Then take the good news where you can," Neil said. "We haven't gotten a lot of it since we first crawled into that giant hole. I want this all over and done with so I can see some sunlight again."

"I think we're all ready for this to be over," Clive said, "and I think it soon will be, one way or another. I just hope we can endure the consequences."

"You're not wrong," Farrah said, placing a hand on Clive's shoulder as she joined them. "But don't get too caught up in how grim things can be. Jason can be a slow learner, so I hope you figure out faster than he did to take your fun where you can. And since this is the most Jason fight you'll ever have, you may as well go wild."

“Hey,” Taika called out. “Does anyone know how to attach a chain gun to a pogo stick?”

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The avatar did not dwell on its missing hand, instead turning its attention back on the people preparing to attack it. As it took a step towards them, a giant, nebulous eye appeared in the air in front of it. The avatar reached for the eye as it fired a beam of transcendent light. The beam was thick as it left the eye but narrowed to a pinpoint as it reached the avatar’s remaining hand. It swiftly carved a sigil into the monstrosity’s palm, the symbol shining with gold, silver and blue light. The moment the beam finished drawing it out, the sigil changed colour to blue and orange and the hand went limp, dangling from the avatar’s wrist.

The beam immediately moved on, this time carving sigils into the avatar’s forearm. More eyes manifested around the avatar, one after the other, each immediately drawing sigils across the avatar’s body. The avatar started producing glowing purple ichor from its eyes, mouth and the missing sections of its body.

Glowing brightly, the viscous liquid crawled over the avatar’s flesh. It erased any partially inscribed sigils but did not affect the completed ones. Those had already set in, paralysing parts of the avatar’s body.

The avatar paid no more attention to Jason’s allies as it concentrated on erasing the sigils. It was a losing fight as there was not enough of the liquid to cover its entire body. The progress was slow, but one sigil after another was completed, each one paralysing a body part. A foot, a forearm. An entire leg, although that was not enough to make the avatar topple. It floated in the air, the foot of one leg and the entirety of the other hanging limp.

On the ground, while the others renewed their attacks, Clive stood peering at the sigils being etched into the avatar’s flesh.

“Those look like divine marks,” he muttered to himself.

“What are divine marks?” Taika asked distractedly. Most of his attention was on the large round bomb he was manhandling into the sidecar of a motorcycle. He was rushing to get it done before the fuse finished burning down. After getting it in, he slapped Nik, who was sitting astride the motorcycle, on the back. The rabbit man gunned the throttle and tore off in the direction of the avatar, tyres kicking up dirt and grass. Taika then moved next to Clive.

“What are divine marks?” he asked again. “Is there another god sticking their head in? Isn’t it Jason doing that?”

“I have no idea,” Clive said. “Divine marks show up when gods perform miracles. Churches record and study them, as you might expect. Mostly they’re hard to see, like soft etchings carved into the landscape around the area where the miracle took place.”

Taika pointed at the sigils glowing brightly on the avatar.

“Those aren’t hard to see, bro.”

“Sometimes they’re very easy to spot,” Gary said, moving to join them. His conjured armour vanished, revealing glowing gold sigils carved all over his bare torso.

“These are Hero’s divine marks,” he said.

“They look different to the ones on that avatar,” Taika said.

“Each god has their own,” Arabelle said. She strolled over while streams of energy flew out from a jar floating over her head to attack the avatar. “I saw the site of one of Healer’s miracles. Those markings were hard to find, mostly drawn into dust and dirt on the ground. We had to rush to record them before the wind blew them away.”

“The symbols being drawn on the avatar belong to Jason,” Boris said. “They are his, and his alone.”

The others turned to look at Boris, still leading the messengers some distance away. The tan, muscular messenger’s long blond hair was whipping around him, the air kicked up by the storm of feathers constantly erupting from his wings. There were so many that they partially obscured him as they rushed forward in a deluge, transforming into transcendent energy as they went. The other messengers were attacking in the same way, but none with Boris’ capability. Not only was he throwing more feathers than the others but his formed a torrent that shifted back and forth like a slithering snake.

The group looked at each other and back at Boris who didn’t seem to be paying them any attention, yet his voice had appeared right amongst them.

“I’m manipulating sound with my aura to reproduce my voice,” Boris explained, his voice once again coming from the air right next to them. “Technically, I’m employing an act of will to replicate my aura manipulating sound to reproduce my voice.”

“What do you mean by those divine marks belonging to Jason?” Clive asked. “He’s not a god.”

“Divine markings is your term,” Boris said. “I imagine you ended up calling them divine markings because gods are the only people on your world using that magic. The marks are the after-effects of using powerful intrinsic-mandate magic. When your gods do something to physical reality, they’re using authority. If they want to project their image into a town square or send a message into the head of one of their worshippers, just having authority is enough for something like that. They don’t need to expend any of it. Miracles

work on a different scale. Authority isn't intended for use in physical reality, and when you use enough of it, it leaves a mark. For gods, that tends to be subtle because intrinsic-mandate magic is like breathing for them. Unless they use it to alter a person, it's a smooth process. Jason is still feeling his way through it, though. What he's doing is like carving his name in the laws of nature with a blunt knife."

"I didn't think Jason understood intrinsic-mandate magic enough to use it like this," Clive said.

"Oh, he's not," Boris said. "He's done something to himself to make this possible. I told you that gods have a natural understanding of it. I think Jason has used the fact that he's basically a god in here to make himself more like an actual god."

"I believe that my intervention was responsible for that choice," Shade said. "I convinced Mr Asano to take a characteristically drastic step. As I feel the bond with him grow more muted, however, I become increasingly fearful of where the course I have set him on leads."

They all looked up at the suffering avatar. There was little doubt that it was losing out as it hung in the air, mostly paralysed as it thrashed like a strung-up animal.

"What's happening to it?" Neil asked as he stuffed Jason into a cannon with a stick.

"Our efforts have given Jason the chance to play spider," Boris said. "While the power of Undeath was distracted, he snared it in a web. Now it's tangled up and he can slowly devour it. The good news is, we've won. We just have to wait for Asano to finish the job."

"What's the bad news?" Neil asked.

"The Reaper's shadow may have understated when he said Asano did something drastic," Boris explained. "Whatever Asano did to himself, I don't know how much of him will be able to come back from that."

"I think I know what he means," Farrah said. "My bond with Jason feels like what Shade described. Muted; blanked maybe. Like parts of him are gone."

"Bond with Jason?" Taika asked. "Have you secretly been his familiar this whole time? Is that how he brought you back from the dead?"

"No," Farrah said. "We do have a bond, and yes, it was formed when we came back from the dead together."

"You're totally his familiar."

"I am not his familiar!" Farrah snapped. "Once Jason started down this astral king path, that was when he realised the bond was there. We discussed it and decided to strengthen it, even though he had no idea what he was doing. We barely notice it, even now. Not unless one of us is really in distress, which is inevitably him, obviously."

“Get back to what Jason has done to himself,” Clive said. “You said he’s been blanked somehow? What did you mean by parts of him are missing?”

Boris answered in place of Farrah.

“There are conclusions we can draw based on what we’ve seen here and what the Reaper’s child and the lovely Farrah have described,” he said.

“Might I suggest,” Shade interrupted, “that you avoid harassing one of Mr Asano’s most precious friends while he is in the middle of a rampage using the same mechanisms as a god does when performing a miracle.”

“That is an excellent point,” Boris said. “Anyway, I believe that Asano has given over his mortal aspect to the part of himself that is becoming an astral king. But that astral king part is incomplete and his mortal aspect is too weak. He’s in danger of losing himself.”

“I know,” Jason’s voice said. “Scary, right?”

They turned to look at what looked like Jason standing behind them in his blood robes.

“Colin,” Shade said. “You’re his Voice of the Will; your connection to Mr Asano is stronger than anyone. Do you know what is happening to him?”

“Yep,” Colin said. “Dad basically put himself in a box so he could go full god mode.”

He winced in pain and staggered as the front of his head turned into smooth, featureless skin. His blank face shifted as if something was crawling under it before returning to normal.

“That was rough,” he said, his voice strained. “As I was saying, he put himself in a box so he could go back to normal when he was gone playing god, and I’m the box. The problem is, while being so close to him meant he could copy himself onto me, he wasn’t exactly precise about wiping himself away.”

“Whatever he did to himself,” Clive said, “it’s spreading to you.”

“Yeah,” Colin said. “I’m going to need some help from someone else with a bond once he’s done with his little project. As soon as he’s done consuming the power, we need to turn him back to normal.”

“What of Gordon?” Shade asked. “He’s not a Voice of the Will, but he did bond with Mr Asano as an avatar. His connection is stronger than mine or Miss Farrah’s.”

Colin waved at the sky full of eyebeams.

“Dad roped him into making all that work. I don’t think he’ll be up to it.”

“Well, then,” Farrah said. “I guess you’d best tell us what we need to do.”