

## 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?*"

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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.”

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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.

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“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.”

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“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.”

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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.”