

## Chapter 821

### Asking For a Lot of Trust

In the dimension-warped M.C. Escher castle Garth had trapped them in, Jason watched Garth move across a bridge that was, from his perspective, upside down. The undead glared at him with the burning light inside the eyes of his skull sockets, but could do nothing more. Although they could look at one another, they could not fling attacks across the dimensional boundaries that invisibly segmented the space. Jason watched as Garth kept hunting him, growing visibly weaker by the minute.

“And you think this messenger set all this up?” Jason asked.

“I do not know anyone else who would have the information and access to put all this into play,” Shade said. “He knows a great deal about you, by means we have yet to determine.”

“You could have told me what a zemravore was when Garth did his big reveal.”

“And interrupt your villain banter?”

“Yeah, that’s fair.”

They continued to watch, Jason’s superior grasp of the dimensional properties of the space allowing them to easily avoid the undead. Garth’s movements grew more sluggish and awkward with each passing moment, slowing to a crawl as shimmering energy emanated from inside his bare ribcage. That energy kept growing, shuddering in instability before finally exploding, scattering shards of bone from Garth’s shattered body.

Jason closed his eyes as he felt the realm collapse. He was hurled through a realm of twisted astral forces, his senses bombarded with a vortex of colour and howling wind. It lasted only a moment and Jason opened his eyes when everything went still. He was back in the transformation zone, deep in the enemy battle line. The undead around him saw his sudden appearance and moved to the attack.

Jason expanded his aura, suppressing theirs and diminishing the undeath energy animating them. He picked up the nearby undead with his aura and flung them away, clearing a space around him. He looked to his feet where the shattered remains of Garth lay in a pile.

More undead were moving in on him but Jason wasn’t taking a stealth approach for the moment. A long shadow arm emerged from his back and drew his sword. It whipped and flailed in a blur of motion while Jason himself stood still. The sword delivered afflictions, including the ghost fire that was so devastating to the undead. Jason wasn’t going for the kill for the moment, only warding off those who disturbed his cleared space.

Jason looked over at his pyramidal cloud fortress, jutting above the fray. He extended his will and the fortress became a beacon for his aura, once more spreading it across the battlefield. He then joined the voice chat for his team, reassuring them of his safe return and the demise of Garth.

“You killed him?” Humphrey asked.

“Actually,” Jason said, “he just kind of got lost and then blew up. It was weird.”

“How?” Rufus asked.

“I suspect that’s something we need to ask Boris Ket Lundi,” Jason said.

“Conveniently enough, he’s heading this way.”

“Who?” Sophie asked.

“A messenger,” Jason said. “One who never seems to meet a faction he won’t pit against another, for reasons that are still unclear. He knows a suspicious amount about me, though.”

Jason knelt to loot Garth's body when purple runes started carving themselves into the broken bones as Garth's skeletal body reformed. Shattered splinters united to become whole, bones mending as if they'd never been broken. At the same time, an aura flooded across the battlefield, washing Jason's away like a sandcastle before the rising tide.

The avatar of Undeath came stomping through the boundary veil of the territory. It was too far away to see but the aura was unmistakable. This territory was claimed by it and claimed thoroughly, the way Jason did it. This was an entity that could create spirit domains. The avatar's aura infused everything as it returned, pressing down on the battlefield and everyone in it. Only the inside of Jason's pyramid was spared, his spiritual domain impenetrable to spiritual pressure.

The suppression of the undead by Jason's aura beaming out from his pyramid proved short-lived. Quashed by the avatar, the undead it had weakened were returned to full strength. The aura radiating from Jason himself wasn't suppressed, the avatar's influence more of a broad brush, but it was diminished. The undead hovering around his cleared space went from a few pushing in to all of them shambling in his direction.

In front of Jason, Garth's body reassembled itself. Jason looked at the skull where the intelligent red light in his eyes had been replaced with mindless purple. Jason had seen the same on countless undead. Everything from body language to aura told Jason that the true essence of Garth was in the Reaper's hands now. What remained was another undead drone; more powerful than those around him but without the spark that made him a person and not just a thing.

“The plan looks to be working,” Jason said through voice chat as he vanished into the shadows, escaping the encroaching undead. “Garth got just back up as a mindless drone. His original aura is gone and the new one is chock full of divine undeath energy. That definitely came from the avatar.”

Similar reports came in from other adventurers. They had been avoiding killing the priests until the avatar arrived but it didn't seem to matter. Even those who died before the avatar's arrival were reanimating, drawing power from the avatar to become powerful but mindless revenants. Even the ones that had been undead in the first place were rising once more, although as echoes of their former selves.

Jason could sense the avatar moving closer to the battle at speed as another divine aura followed it into the territory.

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➤ [Contact \[Gareth Xandier\] has entered voice chat range.](#)

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Miriam was using the command channel to direct forces in the wake of the two divine beings' arrival. Jason pulled Gary into the team channel to take his report.

“You have a sense of how effective Clive's plan was, right?” Jason asked Gary. “We just confirmed on our side that any dead priest will take energy from the avatar, freshly killed or not. The question is, does killing these pricks off weaken the avatar?”

“It does,” Gary confirmed.

“By how much?”

“By more than we'd feared and less than we'd hoped. We need to kill a lot more priests.”

“Gary,” Jason said. “You just gave me a little atheist chubby.”

“Little, huh?” Neil said. “I hope you didn't disappoint—”

“Neil,” Clive said, “I swear to your god, if you say a damn thing about my imaginary wife, your life will become a plague of tiny, hard-to-find ritual magic. Why is Neil's cloud bed so itchy? Turns out there's a tiny ritual circle. Why does Neil keep sneezing? Turns out there's a tiny ritual circle. Why do Neil's clothes never quite fit? No ritual circle; he just keeps wearing the clothes his aunt sends him.”

“What do you expect me to do?” Neil asked. “She just keeps sending them. I'm not going to snub her good intentions and throw them away. She just sends so many; I don't even know how she always knows where I am. I've been roaming all over for years now. It's as if...”

The team channel fell silent for a long moment.

“Has someone,” Neil asked, his tone suggesting through clenched teeth, “been sending messages to my aunt, telling her where I am? Maybe that I go through a lot of clothes while adventuring? Maybe suggesting that they should be robust, as well as nice and loose to move around in. Padded for cold weather and brightly coloured so the team can spot me if I get in danger.”

“No,” Belinda said. “Although I definitely would have, if I’d thought of it.”

“I know one of you did it,” Neil said. “Just confess. I won’t be angry.”

“He’s definitely going to be angry,” Sophie said.

Clive let a groan out over voice chat.

“In case you haven’t noticed,” Clive said, “We’re in the middle of a battle.”

“Thank you, Clive,” Humphrey said.

“That’s why,” Clive said, “I’ll tell you who’s been doing it, Neil, on the condition that you don’t make a stink about it until after the battle.”

“Fine,” Neil said.

“That was a little too quick,” Belinda said. “He’s definitely going to make a stink.”

“Okay, I get it,” Neil said. “I won’t seek revenge until after the fighting is done. Just tell me who it is.”

“I don’t know if I should, now,” Clive said.

“Just tell me!” Neil snarled.

“Fine,” Clive said, his tone reluctant. “It was my wife.”

“Oh, you son of a—”

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Miriam was keeping a sharp eye on the approaching messengers. They’d been happy to observe from their mountain perch thus far, but either the arrival of the avatar or the death of the Undeath high priest had stirred them to action. The concern was what that action would be.

“Operations Commander,” Miriam said. “You’re our designated messenger liaison. Can you go and get a sense of what those messengers are after?”

“What if they kill me?” Jason asked.

“Then we’ll have a pretty good idea of what they’re after.”

“What?” Jason exclaimed.

“What?” Miriam asked.

“You want me to go out and see if they kill me?”

“Sure,” Miriam said. “Or, you know, maybe use the voice chat we’re using right now so you don’t have to go near him.”

“Oh,” Jason said. “Yeah, that makes sense.”

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➤ [Jason Asano] has invited you to a voice chat.

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Boris looked at the floating window in front of him. It wasn't the first such screen he'd seen, with everyone in the transformation zone encountering a few. Jason had imprinted on the zone, causing such windows to pop up periodically, usually related to events in the zone.

Having the windows explain the rules had been a large part of letting enemies and allies alike understand what was happening, how and why. That was especially true for the messengers that weren't Boris himself. They had been the most ignorant going in, but the messages had filled in a large piece of the puzzle.

“So this is the Asano communication power,” Boris said. “Basing it on video game chat has made it very organised and efficient by the standards of communication powers. Are there emojis?”

“Don't try to bunny-ears-lawyer a bunny ears lawyer,” Jason warned him. “State your intentions, Boris, or we're coming for you.”

“I think you have bigger issues than me,” Boris said. “That avatar is moving fast. It'll be here any moment now.”

“It's just power with no intellect behind it, now that Garth's dead,” Jason told him. “You're good at playing sly but you showed your hand a little killing him like that. You played us like duelling banjos and I don't want to end up like Ned Beatty with you telling me to squeal like a pig.”

“Really? You're going with *Deliverance*? That scene? Not a classy reference. I thought *Battle of the Planets* or *A-Team* would be more your speed. Oh, you're checking if I really have been on Earth. Well, I have. For a lot longer than you.”

“Good to know, but that's something to get into later. What are you and your friends up to?”

“I've been watching your people avoid the priests. That's smart. If they come back right after they die, they'll draw more power out of the avatar than if they've been dead for a while.”

“You seem to know a lot about everything.”

“A lot of experience and a very good memory.”

“Something that makes you exceedingly dangerous.”

"A lot of people say the same thing about you."

"Yeah. Then they try and kill me."

"Are you going to kill me as a precaution then?"

"No," Jason said. "Like I said, people try that on me all the time. It hardly ever works and turns a potential threat into a guaranteed one."

"What now, then?"

"Now you answer the question you dodged. What are you and your messengers doing?"

"Coming to help."

"You, I can believe. Maybe. But that many messengers?"

"There were more. I've turned these two golds to the Unorthodoxy and killed the ones who refused. The silvers obey because they're silvers."

"You played Garth and me off against one another. If he'd won, would you be flying to help his side?"

"You're not so dense as to believe that. You and Garth were both smart enough to realise that I set him all the way up. The only good outcome for me was you being the one to come out of that. If you were so incompetent that you couldn't win with everything I put in place, you weren't worth coming down here for in the first place."

"You came here for me?"

"I'm from Earth, Asano. What do you think I came here for?"

"After the way you treated Marla? The lax sexual harassment laws."

Boris let out a laugh.

"Boris, as far as I'm concerned, you're the biggest potential threat on this battlefield. I don't think trying to kill you is a good idea, but I've been stuck with plenty of bad ones in my short but exciting career. If I think for a second that your people are going to turn on us, we'll prioritise putting you down over the avatar."

"And here I thought we were getting along."

"I think you know what not-getting-along-with-me looks like Boris, and that this isn't it. And I think that you're smarter, older and more cunning than I am. So I'm going to be very careful."

"I thought you'd appreciate a little scheming."

"I do. I respect it, too, which is why I'm going to be so careful."

"Well, I guess I can accept that. I'll follow your lead, Asano. Where do you want me to attack from?"

"The Wangaratta Performing Arts & Convention Centre."

Boris laughed again.

"That may be a little further than is strictly practical," he pointed out.

"Come at them from the opposite side to where my people are," Jason said. "Stay clear of my people and focus on the priests. If we all come through this, we'll talk again. While you and yours are standing on the ground, right next to my friend Gary."

"That's asking for a lot of trust from me."

"You're messengers."

"That's racial profiling."

"Tough. Your entire species is an Iranian wearing a 'death to America' t-shirt through airport security. You don't like those terms, you can sod off back to your mountain."