

Chapter 782

Sometimes They Do

“A miracle?” Emir asked. “That’s why you met the goddess of death?”

“You think we don’t need one?” Jason asked.

“No, we definitely need one.”

“That’s why I thought I’d go supplier direct.”

“You know, I used to talk about my fancy diamond-rank connections all the time.

Knowing you makes it very hard to be a braggart, Jason.”

Jason let out a wheezing laugh that turned into coughing.

“Help me up?” he asked after the fit subsided.

Emir helped Jason unsteadily to his feet.

“Are you really alright?”

“I’ll be fine. Spiritual damage is harder to get used to than physical damage, but you can get there. I think I’m building up a tolerance.”

“Jason, you may want to re-examine the way you approach life if you’re injuring your soul enough to build up a tolerance for it.”

“I know, right? You didn’t answer me, by the way.”

“What was the question?”

“Did you see a miracle happening?”

“I didn’t notice one, no.”

Jason nodded.

“I told Death I wanted a god who helps those that help themselves. I’d best get on that.”

“You’re not exactly in fighting shape, Jason.”

“It’s fine. I just need to get my aura under control. The body will follow. Let’s head for the frontline.”

Jason took one stumbling step, righting himself before he fell over. Emir grabbed him and slung Jason’s arm over his shoulder for support. It was a little awkward as Emir was decently tall while Jason was not, but they got slowly moving. They made their way towards the frontline from the protected position where Jason had communed with Death.

The stonework underfoot was cracked and strewn with sinister, red-veined plants that painted everything with a bloody red glow. Jason could have floated over the uneven floor of the tunnel but he wasn’t using his still-recovering aura. Instead, Emir helped him pick his way through the uneven terrain as he grew stronger and faster by the moment. Moving

with care also helped him concentrate on something other than his mind spike of a headache.

“I can feel your aura starting to calm down,” Emir said. “It feels different.”

“It does?”

“You can’t tell?”

“Right now my soul feels like a meat smoothie. I guess that’s different.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.”

“I did just make a pact with the goddess of death. Gods don’t muck about when cutting deals, as it turns out. Is my aura all deathly now? Bleak and cold with the silent inevitability of the final demise?”

“No,” Emir said. “It feels... I’m not sure how to describe it. Natural, but not of nature. It’s not plants and trees, it’s more like...”

Emir paused to give it some more thought before continuing.

“Jason, your aura has always given off a sense of authority. It’s judgemental. Impersonal. Oppressive. It feels like a massive stone slab, engraved with commandments, that will fall over and crush you if you break them.”

“That’s not the most flattering description I’ve heard.”

“It is what it is, Jason. This change fits into that, another part of that authoritative nature. It’s a sense that messing with the laws of life and death around you is a very bad idea. It doesn’t feel like something imposed on you from the outside, though. It hasn’t changed what you are so much as unveiled something new that still completely fits.”

“A new sin for people to commit.”

“Yes, but not as harsh as I make that sound. Murder is a transgression too. A rigid authority shielding you from that can be harsh but also comforting in the safety it offers. This is similar, but it also feels natural. Warm. Rather than safety from murder, it’s safety from...”

He gestured at the frontline and the undead pushing in on the living.

“...from that,” Emir continued. “From the cold, corrupting grip of unlife. It’s like your aura went from being a courthouse to being a—”

“Please don’t say a church.”

“I’m sorry, Jason, but that’s what it feels like. Judgemental, but also comforting. Sheltering. An authority that tolerates no transgression but also offers sanctuary.”

“I don’t want people thinking of my aura like church roaming around. I’m not a tent revival preacher.”

“It’s a good change, Jason. Your aura needed some softening up.”

“Your description doesn’t make it sound soft.”

“I’ll say ‘less hard,’ then. Freedom is good, and while I know that’s a principle you hold, no one seems to have told your aura.”

“My aura power is called Hegemony, Emir, not ‘let’s all have a nice time and talk about scrapbooking.’”

“Yes, but your power is only an aspect of your aura. More important is who you are, at the core.”

“So, it’s not my power that’s a hardcore religious thug, it’s me?”

“I’m not saying that. And I’m not saying your aura is bad. It can be hard, yes, but sometimes what you need is hard. Like it or not, Jason, you’re our leader here. The ultimate authority in this expedition. Your aura being so authoritative helps when you’re giving commands.”

“It’s mostly Miriam giving commands.”

“Jason, most of these adventurers were trained their whole lives. They understand the difference between a field commander and a commander-in-chief. You were a bit uneven at the start of this expedition, it’s true. Maybe you let Miriam take the lead a little too much. This kind of leadership is new to you; it’s okay to rely on an experienced hand. But when the moment called, you answered. When the dead rose, you took command. You stepped forward and charted our course when what we needed was a strong hand at the tiller. Leadership isn’t just about giving commands, Jason. People have to rely on you. An aura that feels like a sanctuary in dangerous times is something people will follow.”

“Thank you,” Jason said. “You’ve led a large and successful operation for a long time, and I’ve seen that your people like and respect you. I admire your leadership ability, so that means a lot coming from you.”

“Thank you, although it’s mostly Constance if I’m being honest. Without her, I’d be hopeless. I have ideas, but she’s the one who has to figure out how to make them work. She’s my Miriam, I guess.”

“Then I’d best not learn all my lessons from you. I have no intention of secretly pining after Miriam for a decade before finally growing the balls to propose.”

“Do you want to get dropped on the ground?”

Jason chuckled.

“Actually, yes, let me go,” he said. “I’m recovering quite quickly, so let’s give this another try.”

Jason started walking on his own, although Emir kept close in case he stumbled. Jason thought over Emir’s words for a while before speaking up, his voice troubled.

“Emir, you said people will follow my aura.”

“Yes. Jason, I haven’t just been going on and on about this to make small talk. I’ve been trying to express how your aura feels from the outside because there’s something I think you don’t understand.”

“What’s that?”

“The impact your aura has when you stop hiding it. You hide it, most of the time. Not just holding back the strength but masking the more unusual aspects of it. When you take off that mask, the way you have for these battles, people see it in full. You don’t realise the impact it has on people.”

“I get that my aura is strong and can do some weird stuff, but-”

“It’s not about how strong it is, Jason. It’s not about how you can use it. I’m talking about the most fundamental thing: how it feels. People of this world are used to potent auras floating around. Adventurers with their well-trained power. Aristocrats stuffed to the gills with monster cores, holding back their auras with magic items so they don’t give some old man a heart attack.”

He gestured around them.

“Ours is a world of personal power,” he said. “My understanding is that yours isn’t.”

“This is my world, now.”

“But you weren’t raised here. You weren’t brought up surrounded by power but, in this world, we are. Even normal rankers are exposed to auras they can barely sense, yet wash over them constantly, brushing against their perception their whole lives.”

“I’m not sure that I get your point,” Jason said.

“The point is that, in this world, we grow up learning what powerful people feel like. And what power that that doesn’t come from people feels like. I grew up visiting worship squares and seeing gods. Everyone does. And I’m not saying you feel like a god, Jason, although not entirely unlike one, either. I’m saying that your power feels like something different and the stronger you grow, the closer you get to feeling like other than just a person. You need to understand that this isn’t just me talking. Every person you meet in this world who gets a real look at your aura feels that way.”

“Are you saying I’m not a person?”

“Of course you’re a person, Jason, but your power doesn’t feel like it belongs to one. Power like that is something the people of this world grew up learning to venerate. To follow. To worship even.”

“Are you trying to get me in trouble with the gods?”

“Jason, you already are. You think just anyone can call up a god to ask for a miracle?”

“Isn’t that the whole point of prayer?”

“Most people don’t get answers, Jason, let alone a personal visitation. We’ve been watching gods appear before you as if you were a priest to all of them. We’ve watched you talk to them as if they’re equals, which is one thing, but the way talk back is very much another. People don’t think you’re a god, Jason, but we see you standing on the same stage as them. Shining with a power that is maybe closer to theirs than to ours. Everything we’ve been told about power from when we were children tells us that what you have is something to be followed. And we will follow, believe me. I don’t think you get a choice in that.”

Jason stopped walking and took a deep breath before letting it out slowly.

“I know I’m the centre of a lot of strangeness, Emir. Some I’ve chosen and some I haven’t. But I’m still just a person in the middle of it all.”

“No, you’re not. You don’t get be ‘just’ anything anymore. Look at what we’re here to do. We’re trying to rewrite reality and turn you into what? Some kind of messenger demigod? You’re limping along because you just called up the goddess of death to cut a deal.”

“I just wanted a miracle. The deal was her idea.”

Emir gave him a flat look.

“I’m not exactly refuting your point, am I?” Jason asked.

“Jason, you have a power that goes beyond just being a leader. And we both know it’s going to get less normal as the years pass, not more. People feel that and they’re going to follow you for it. At some point, you have to decide what you’re going to do about that.”

“You’ve been saying my name a lot. It feels aggressive, like a verbal finger poke.”

Emir jabbed Jason’s forehead with his finger.

“That’s because I’m trying to get something through that head. Somewhere in your mind is the idea that you’re still that lost kid I met six years ago. That you’re a normal person in extraordinary circumstances. You’re not. You *are* the extraordinary circumstances, and you’re happening to people. Sooner or later, we all need you to take responsibility for that. That’s why I’m spending all this time talking about your aura, about how it feels to be around you. That’s why I’m talking about leadership.”

“I’m looking to be an astral king, Emir, not a regular king.”

“Jason, listen to yourself. You’re not trying to be a king, you’re trying to be a special magic king. But it doesn’t matter what label you put on it. Whatever you call it, it’s about the responsibility. And you know what I’m talking about, even if you haven’t admitted it to yourself. In the Storm Kingdom, you opened a portal that shouldn’t have opened. You used it to rescue people it shouldn’t have been able to carry. Was that your first miracle, Jason?”

“Doing that almost killed me. Miracles don’t kill the people using them.”

“Yes, Jason. Sometimes they do.”

They resumed their walk in silence while Jason considered Emir’s words. His hobble became a walk and his walk became a stride, no longer worried about tripping on vines and uneven ground. Emir was hesitant to go but the battle lines needed him. It didn’t take Jason long to convince him to return to the fray. Jason continued alone and, by the time he reached Miriam, he felt largely intact. He still had a throbbing headache but his aura had settled enough that he could use it again.

Miriam was unleashing powerful magic while also issuing commands through voice chat. Like Allayeth who had trained her, the plant essence was central to Miriam’s power set. She showed visible distaste at using the bizarre plants produced by the messenger tree, but Plant specialists were always made stronger by plant-rich environments, especially when those plants had a lot of magic.

“What have you been up to?” she asked Jason when he arrived. She was standing on a large rock for vantage and he employed his now-stable aura to float up next to her.

“You asked for a miracle,” he said. “I was praying.”

“And how did that go?”

Jason closed his eyes and calmed his mind, readying to push out hard with his aura.

“I think we’re about to find out.”

They were in a tunnel, wide but easier to hold than open chambers. Miriam surrendered those chambers cheaply, but in the tunnels, the undead had to pay. Jason was floating in the air, not far behind the line where adventurers, cultists and brighthearts held back the unliving tide. The lifeless foes were eerily silent, limitless in number and unconcerned at being mowed down like grass. They had no morale to shake as they climbed over growing mounds of the undead that came before them.

Jason sent his aura flooding down the tunnel to wash over the dead. The effect was immediate as the defenders sensed the pervasive energy of undeath being washed away. The power infused in the undead as a group to devour magic thrown at them vanished; attacks that had landed weakly moments before now slammed home with impact.

Most notably affected were the brighthearts and the messengers. Their elemental powers had been the most severely impeded, fading to little or nothing by the time they struck the undead. Now those attacks were impacting hard. Explosive balls of fire sent charred and dismembered remains flying through the air. Clouds of embers and ash scoured dead flesh from dry bones. Stone spears that had been glancing off undead bodies now tore them apart, creating palisades decorated with helplessly impaled victims.

“This is your miracle?” Miriam asked. “Not bad. You just turned the largest part of our force from all but useless to highly effective.”

“The miracle isn’t mine and this isn’t it,” Jason told her. “When it comes, save your thanks for the goddess of death.”

“Death is a god.”

“Why does no one know about the gender fluid thing?”

“What?”

Jason was saved from giving an explanation, and Miriam from getting it, by the arrival of Death’s miracle. Every member of the defending side had ghostly white flames ignite over their bodies, ethereal and pure. It did not burn but had a calming warmth, shoring up morale and forestalling any panic at suddenly catching on fire.

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- You have been affected by a miracle of Death.
 - You have been affected by [Divine Ghost Fire].
 - You may not resurrect while under this effect.
 - You are impervious to undeath energy.
 - Any undeath-related afflictions have been purged.
 - Any undead you contact or affect with your abilities will be affected by [Divine Ghost Fire] which is extremely harmful to them.

 - [Divine Ghost Fire] (affliction, damage-over-time, magic): Divine ghost fire is harmless to the living, calming the mind and shielding them from the power of undeath and purging any undeath magic from which they are suffering. Divine ghost fire spreads on contact and is extremely harmful to the undead, degrading their animating force and inflicting ongoing transcendent damage.
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Miriam immediately saw a problem and opened up a voice channel to all the defenders.

“Don’t stop and read!” she yelled at them “Fight!”