

Chapter 682

Something to Turn the Tide

Jason sneezed.

Jason was standing on the corpse of a monster as it fell through the sky, using shadow arms to hold himself in place. Shade and Gordon were flying next to him as he rode the monster downward, away from a spear-wielding messenger flying above.

“Mr Asano, did you just sneeze?” Shade asked.

“I did. That’s weird, right?”

“Given that you do not have sinuses, I would say yes.”

“Maybe someone is talking about me.”

“I don’t see the relevance.”

“Sometimes you sneeze when someone is talking about you.”

“That does not sound likely.”

“It’s a thing.”

“I do not believe that it is a thing.”

“It’s totally a thi—”

Jason shadow-jumped using his cloak, leaving it behind as a spear made of fused-together teeth passed through it, having been thrown by the messenger. She was rocketing down headfirst, wings back and tight to avoid drag, another spear appearing in her hand as she conjured a fresh one.

A Shade body emerged from a small shadow cast on her body by her arm. Jason jumped out of Shade’s body, conjuring a new cloak around him. Shadow arms shot out of it to grab the messenger and drag Jason down to slam his feet into her back. He pushed his feet in hard as he grabbed her wings and hauled back on them, yanking her body into an arch.

The messenger went from a controlled dive to an uncontrolled plunge. It was a peculiarity of messengers, Jason had discovered, that damaging or constricting a messenger’s wings impeded their ability to fly. This had surprised him as he had always assumed that their wings were unrelated to actual flight. He didn’t know much about aerodynamics, but he knew an eight foot woman with bird wings was not going to fly around without a good lot of magic. Their flight magic was apparently seated in their wings, however, and he was appreciative of the weakness.

With the messenger’s ability to fly curtailed, they were heading for the ground at a rapid pace. Jason continued to pull on her wings while pushing his feet into her back,

holding her in place. She reached back and grabbed his ankles, but lacked the leverage to dislodge him. Bone spikes shot out of her fingertips and dug into his legs, which he ignored.

Numerous shadow arms coming from Jason help him maintain his position, mounted on her back like a sky surfer. One arm held his conjured dagger, making rapid, shallow stabs like a sewing machine. As the dagger loaded her up with special attacks, Jason chanted a spell.

“Bear the mark of your transgressions.”

A small amount of transcendent damage seared a brand onto her face, making her yell all the louder. Jason cast another spell.

“Your fate is to suffer.”

“GET OFF ME YOU FILTH!”

“If you’d warned me you were attacking the city,” Jason shouted over the rush of air as they fell, “I would have had time for a bath. That’s on you.”

She had dropped the conjured tooth spear to grab at his legs, the lengthy weapon having no good angle. When stabbing his legs accomplished nothing, she let them go and conjured a new weapon. This one was a giant blade made from jagged, yellowing bone. It was a vastly oversized sickle with a deeply curved hook; the tip was covered in sharp, irregular barbs. The messenger was holding it so the point was aiming back at herself. It was sized just right to swing at her back and the man perched upon it.

“Lady, has anyone ever told you that your powers seem kind of evil?”

“DIE!”

She swung the sickle back over her head to stab at Jason with pinpoint accuracy. The viciously barbed tip looked like it passed through Jason, as if he were a ghost. In reality, a combination of a subtle back-sway and his cloak bending space meant it passed through the air in front of him, jabbing into the messenger’s own back. She screamed, more rage than pain, and the weapon vanished.

“You realise that was a terrible plan, right?”

Jason felt a mass of power building inside the messenger but he wasn’t quick enough to escape before bone spikes erupted from every part of her body. They tore through her flesh and thin, practical clothing to jab in every direction. Jason was impaled dozens of times by thin bone spikes that broke off inside him as he moved, the fragments crawling through his body like worms.

“I already have worms for that, you hag,” Jason said through gritted teeth. The messenger didn’t respond, having gone limp. Her aura had also greatly diminished and

Jason realised that the attack took large amounts of her reserves. After madly chasing Jason around the entire battle, her body wasn't up to the expenditure when it was being ravaged by Jason's afflictions already. He suspected the main culprit was his Tainted Meridians affliction, which forcibly raised mana costs. It made the massive attack consume even more mana than the messenger had realised and she passed out from mana exhaustion.

Jason forcibly pushed himself off the spikes, more of them breaking off in the process. He used his cloak to float, letting the unconscious messenger drop. He knew she would likely wake before hitting the ground, even if there was only a short drop left. Messengers recovered even faster than adventurers, so she would—

Jason watched her crash into the ground, limbs in that awkward sprawl of a thing that wasn't alive anymore.

“Huh.”

Valk Vohl was far from a stand-up citizen of Yaresh, but there was a difference between being a criminal and not standing up when angels and their strange pet monsters invaded. Not when he could fight. He was no adventurer, but he'd done his part during the monster surge and he was doing it again now. He was back to back with some adventurer whose name he'd forgotten, controlling what looked like a giant stick figure made of swords as it swung its arms at the monsters.

It wasn't enough. The monsters kept pouring out of the sky, no matter how many they killed, and they were close to the point of being overwhelmed. He and the adventurer were both low on mana, their armour rent and skin wet with blood.

When one of the messengers splattered onto the broken flagstones of the road, bone spikes sticking out and limbs awkwardly splayed, he was only startled for a moment. It, possibly she, wasn't getting up to kill him, so he turned his attention back to the things that were. Then he saw a figure emerge from the shadow of a half-collapsed bordello.

There was something about the man that unnerved him, and he realised that he couldn't sense that man's presence, even looking right at him.

“Gold-ranker,” he said, the words arresting the attention of the other adventurer.

“Where?” he asked, looking around. He saw the man who had come from the shadows, walking over to the dead messenger. He was calm in the chaos, wearing a robe the colour of dried blood. His eyes were inhuman, glowing blue and orange. His features were just a little too sharp for a truly classic high-rank handsomeness, the neat beard failing to entirely hide the lengthy chin.

“We could use a little help here!” the adventurer called out and the man looked up at them. Then his gaze moved upward, to the monsters above. That was when they felt his aura. It rolled out like a physical thing, making the air around them seem heavy. They realised he was no gold-ranker, but he didn’t feel like an essence user, either. His aura was tyrannical, as if everything belonged to him by virtue of it being around him. Valk feared for a moment that he was some kind of wingless messenger, until he saw how the monsters reacted.

They ran.

The creatures flew off, crashing into their fellows still coming down in a mad panic to flee whatever the man standing over the dead messenger was. Valk watched them go, then felt his gaze drawn to the man as if by a magnet. He watched as the man held a hand over the messenger and chanted a spell, his voice winter cold.

“As your life was mine to reap, so your death is mine to harvest.”

Transcendent light of blue, silver and gold was drained from the corpse, into the man’s hand as the body dissolved into rainbow smoke. As the man drained the messenger’s energy, Valk thought he heard a scream, but it was somehow picked up with his aura senses, not his ears. An image formed over the man, that of a shadowy bird speckled with silver stars. The man finished claiming the messenger’s energy and the image vanished.

“Who are you?” Valk asked him.

“I only drove the monsters off for a moment,” the man said, his voice hard but lacking the malevolence with which he had chanted the spell. “Get what rest you can and be ready for their return.”

“Will you stay and help?”

“More messengers are coming for me. I won’t bring them down on you.”

Shadows rose up to wreath his body, becoming a shadowy mantle. A dark figure rose from Valk’s own shadow and the man stepped into it, vanishing. The shadow figure then retreated into Valk’s shadow, also disappearing. He stared at his shadow warily, wondering what else was in there.

Jason emerged from Shade’s body on a rooftop, looking up. He could sense Rufus not far off, and an army of monsters glowing with Rufus’ silver and gold flames. Soon enough, Rufus would use his zone power, eclipse, and start consuming those afflictions, hopefully shooting a few messengers out of the sky.

Jason wished that he had been as effective. He had taken out of the messengers harassing him, but they had won and he had lost. It was almost certainly too late for his butterflies to spread properly, even if he managed to get them going now. He'd been pointlessly running around the whole battle, accomplishing nothing.

Jason had not felt inadequate in his power set in years, since he had been a green iron-ranker with half his power set yet to awaken. But he could sense the places around the city, and even this battle over the entertainment district, where affliction specialists were succeeding where he failed. It was the first time that he felt lesser for being an affliction skirmisher.

For all that they were forced to build whole teams to hide behind, it was here, in open war, that they showed their true worth. Left alone they would die quickly, where Jason would thrive. But where he had stealth powers, they had afflictions. Where he had utility powers, they had affliction. And where he had affliction, they had afflictions.

Jason had to find ways to make his powers work in any situation, where they simply picked the appropriate ones from their selection. They weren't restricted to complicated butterfly-based delivery systems that could be shut down by an enemy that knew what they were doing. If an enemy stopped one approach, they could simply use another.

Jason had already given up on wiping out huge waves of monsters with his butterflies some time ago. It wasn't going to work and there were other afflictions for that. Instead, he decided to focus on wiping out the messenger team that had been sent after him. The monsters were ultimately a disposable force, and if enough messengers went down, the enemy would pull out.

His efforts to put a stop to the messenger team had not gone as well as he had hoped at first. They were quite capable, working together well and harassing him without any exploitable overextensions. They even had one of the messenger's rare healers, meaning that chipping away at them was pointless.

The group of messengers were a team and their practised cooperation showed as they swiftly eliminated any butterflies, along with any monsters that were spawning them. In response, Jason had spread out his attempts to trigger a butterfly chain.

The biggest advantage Jason had over them was that they absolutely had to shut down the butterflies and anything producing more of them – ideally including Jason. They destroyed the butterflies and any monster producing them. This meant that he could leverage his mobility to force them to split up.

Eventually, he had allowed their most aggressive member to get what seemed like a clear shot at Jason's back. She overextended, a little too far from where the others were

quashing butterflies, allowing Jason to counterattack. Now she was dead and devoured, her remnant life force getting him a little closer to another chance to resurrect.

He looked up at the teeming monsters, sensing the messengers amongst them. They would stick together now that he'd taken one of them out; they had to know as well as he did that it was too late for the butterflies to have a massive impact. They would most likely stay as a group, eliminating butterflies as best they could, but letting some of them go rather than compromise their safety again.

Shade stood next to Jason as he watched the sky.

"Thinking on it, Mr Asano, I may have been wrong."

"About what?"

"The sneeze. We know that your powers often interpret themselves in a way that has meaning to you, and we know that you have some powerful sensory ability that you are unable to consciously use. Perhaps your sneeze is a manifestation of that mysterious sensory power, revealing that someone actually was talking about you."

"I have an extra sense I don't know about?"

"The capabilities demonstrated by your original power called the Quest System prove that. It was your ability, yet it knew things that your conscious mind did not."

"You're right," Jason mused. "Do you think I'll be able to use the sense that made that power work once I'm higher rank?"

"Perhaps. Or perhaps that sensory power is long gone and it really was just a sneeze. That power may have been fuelled by lingering astral energy from when you first became an outworlder. The ability may have evolved for the simple reason that the fuel ran out and you couldn't use it anymore."

"You'd only just become my familiar had barely signed on when I lost that ability right?"

"That is correct, Mr Asano."

"How did you even think of that ability, to draw that conclusion? You barely saw it in action."

"It is not a conclusion, Mr Asano, but a postulation. As to why I thought of the ability, it is arguably the most startling one in your repertoire. A sensory ability that powerful, even when you were normal rank? Clearly it was not tied to your aura or magical senses as you had neither. I am very old, Mr Asano, and there is very little that I am unable to at least postulate on. Whatever sense fuelled your Quest System ability is outside even my experience."

"So you have no idea?"

“At best, I could guess at something that I cannot be certain is even real. If anyone, it would pertain to you, but I hesitate to speak on it. It is more myth than anything, and less the ‘heroes and gods’ kind of myth than the ‘man in a trailer with a foil hat’ kind of myth. Although it usually does involve heroes and gods.”

“You’ll have to tell me about it some time we aren’t in the middle of a city invasion.”

“I had been wondering why you were just standing here. Are you attempting to confront the remainder of the messenger team?”

“No, they’d kill me. But I want them close enough to really see what they’ve chosen to pit themselves against.”

“I thought you were saving that for when they—”

“They will. Soon. I might have been shut down, but plenty of others weren’t. My biggest contribution was tying up a bunch of messengers so they couldn’t harass other adventurers. The adventurers here on the ground are feeling overwhelmed, but they’re holding on. People like Zara and the affliction specialists are doing work, and the messengers’ commander will need something to turn the tide.”