

Chapter 827

No Limit

Jason's world was breaking. Trees were rotting and falling over. Buildings crumbled as whole sections fell away, leaving them unable to support their own weight. The ground was turning to purple-black sludge. Ghostly white flames resisted the encroachment but it was a losing battle. The fire was driven by Jason's will and his will was spent.

Jason stood in the middle of a field, exhausted and barely standing. It had been a long time since pain had bothered him, after years of severed limbs, impalings and even decapitation at the hands of his foes. More than anything else, nothing had been the equal of his first encounter with the Builder. The great astral being had scoured his soul, scraping away at the exterior so Jason would let him in.

This was worse. The power of Undeath was devouring him from the inside out, stripping away his soul and claiming it for itself. It was still driven only by a mindless echo of an absent god, yet that echo struck Jason like thunder, battering him over and over. And once the power had claimed him completely, it would own his will, leaving Jason as nothing but a hollowed-out puppet.

He wanted to keep fighting. Keep resisting and claw back what had been taken. But there was no reprieve, as there had been with the Builder. No clock to run out if he just held on long enough. Jason wasn't rolling over, but there was no more fight left in him either. There was nothing left to fight with.

The soul realm was breaking down, not just physically but in its very nature. Everything was in flux, vulnerable to manipulation by anyone with the will to do so. His sense of the space was shaky at best; his former omniscience failing him. He'd focused enough to shore up certain areas. The space Sophie's mother lived in would hold out longer than most places, as would the underground caverns of the brighthearts. But nothing would last forever, and when Jason fell, so would they.

Jason didn't even notice that he'd closed his eyes. Despite the pain, he felt an urge to lay down, as if gravity was growing stronger. He wanted to drop, to close his eyes and let go. He drew a sharp breath through clenched teeth, fighting back against his desire to give up.

Jason opened his eyes and looked at the avatar in the distance. It stood still, unmoving, towering over the trees like a kaiju. He knew the physical avatar was dead, but that had always been a shell. The true essence of it was the power of Undeath, and now it was inside of Jason's soul. Even this avatar didn't matter. It was just a representation in

his mind, unconsciously created by Jason himself. The power was everywhere, as was the damage it dealt, chewing up the landscape.

Despair tainted Jason's mind, which in turn tainted the land around him. Colour leached from what remained uncorrupted while the corruption grew more vibrant, parts even showing a purple glow. Unable to hold himself upright, Jason dropped to his knees.

"Is this it?" Shade asked with scornful disappointment. "Is this all you amount to, Mr Asano?"

Jason looked up at Shade, pain and hurt written across his expression.

"Shade?"

"What are you doing, Mr Asano."

"I thought... I thought I could..."

Jason bowed his head, tears pushed out of his eyes as he closed them tightly.

"I thought I was enough," he whispered in shame.

"And now you think you aren't?" Shade asked.

"I'm spent, Shade. I don't have anything left."

"You think will is like mana? That you can burn it off by throwing out a few powers? Use it all up in a fight? Who convinced you it was such a small thing?"

"I can't—"

"The brighthearts are here, Mr Asano. Everything that remains of their entire civilisation. What do you think they are going through right now as all this happens around them? How helpless are they? How fearful?"

"I want to fight, you know I do. I just don't think I can."

"If the spirit is willing, do you think it matters if the body is weak? In this place? You think that's air you're breathing?"

"I'm not breathing. Wait, did you just quote *The Matrix*?"

"I know you are in more pain than you have ever felt. I know that you are only clutching onto sanity because all the pain that came before has prepared you."

"It's not enough," Jason choked out.

"You think that you are at your limit, Mr Asano, but the will has no limit. The only way that your will can be exhausted is if you choose to quit. If you give up on yourself, on your friends, on all the people taking shelter here. You think you cannot fight, but you are fighting. Every moment you don't surrender, the battle goes on. You think you have exhausted your willpower, but it cannot be exhausted. Will has no limit so long as you have the resolve to keep fighting, keep standing."

"I don't know if I can."

“Mr Asano, I have known you for some time, now. Do you know what makes you special? What has made you the focus of so many powerful forces, both ally and enemy? Why are people willing to risk everything for you?”

“Rakish charm?” Jason asked, the pained, half-sobbing delivery undercutting the attempt at humour.

“Resolve, Mr Asano. The resolve to help people for no more reason than they need it. To stand when no one else can or will. To make the insane choice because it has to be made, even if it kills you. Time and again you do this, and now you have to do it again. Stand because you have to. Because people need to. Stand, even if you don't think you can. I think you can. I know you can.”

Jason looked up and Shade, realising that Gordon and Colin were beside him. Colin, more intimately connected to him than the others, was barely standing, ravaged by undeath like the land around them.

“On your feet, Mr Asano. I know you think you've reached your limit, but there is no limit.”

“It feels like there's a limit.”

“The Builder once tried to convince you that was the case through pain. It was a lie because he knew that all you had to do was tell him no forever and he could do nothing.”

“It didn't feel like nothing.”

“No, but it was still a lie that you might surrender your soul. And now you are telling yourself that lie. Giving yourself an excuse to give up. To surrender to the pain. We need you to embrace that pain, Mr Asano. To accept it and the fight it represents. Do you have the resolve? Or will you surrender Colin to the god of Undeath? Will you give up on Miss Wexler's mother, on everything left of the brightheart people?”

Jason looked up at Shade as hope, fear and doubt warred across his face.

“I don't know if I can.”

“You can, and I will tell you how. You have forgotten the most fundamental lesson about what this place is, or perhaps you never truly learned it.”

“What?”

“You have not been human for a long time, Mr Asano, but it is what you still are in your mind. It's why you give yourself limits in a place where you have none. Perhaps you fear what happens when you truly let go of who you are, but that fear is a false one. That isn't who you are but who you were. You left that behind a long time ago, but refuse to admit it to yourself. You keep telling people you aren't human, as if saying it is a talisman that will let you keep hold of your humanity. I'm sorry, Mr Asano, but that slipped through

your fingers long ago and you need to accept that if you're going to put up a fight. There is only so far you can push a human, Mr Asano, but you are not human. You've simply used the power of this place to turn yourself into one. When you let go of that idea, you let go of the limitations it imposes on you. It is not the spoon that bends; it is only yourself."

Jason took several sobbing breaths. He leaned forward, putting his fists on the ground to help him get unsteadily to his feet.

Jason's friends, Boris and his messenger army moved through an increasingly miserable landscape. Ethereal ghost fire and glowing purple corruption were all over, with everything else drained of colour and life. They were being led by Nik and one of Shade's bodies, heading for an obvious landmark: the towering avatar.

"I thought that thing died," Sophie said.

"No," Gary said. "The avatar I fought was just a vessel for Undeath's power. When the power moved in here, the vessel out there was left empty and inert."

"So, you can fight it again?"

"Unfortunately," Shade said, "The divine power infusing Mr Xandier will not avail him in this place. Not unless he uses it to try and take over Mr Asano's soul. Which I will thank him not to."

"Why won't it work?" Sophie asked.

"Because Jason's soul realm isn't a true physical space," Clive said. "We're basically roaming around in Jason's imagination."

"Really?" Neil asked.

"No," Clive said. "but it's as good an explanation as you'll get. The reality is nothing like that, but the full explanation is wildly complex and involves metaphysical theory that would take several years of study to grasp. I don't have the time to teach and you don't have time to learn."

"Or the inclination," Neil said.

"Or the ability, let's be honest," Sophie said. "There's no way I get through one lecture by Clive without falling asleep, let alone years of them."

"You don't know what you're missing," Belinda said. "A lot of people would jump at the chance to study under Clive."

"Thank you," Clive said.

"Mr Standish is correct in stating that Mr Asano's soul realm operates by different rules to a normal physical reality," Shade said. "That is more true now than ever. Because of the nature of this space, your essence abilities will be ineffective."

“Then how do we fight?” Humphrey asked.

“In this place, unless you start trying to take it over for yourselves, as Undeath’s power is doing, the only thing that you can use is will. The intent to impose yourself upon the world around you.”

“Using will as an active force is something only gold-rankers can do,” Arabelle said. “Barring outliers like Jason.”

“The nature of this place changes that,” Shade explained. “As long as your intent is focused, you will find that enacting your will on the space around you is not just possible, but natural. It will even be a useful head start once they do reach gold-rank.”

“How do we use it?” Humphrey asked.

“As I stated,” Shade explained, “the key is focus. Having a structure to use as the framework for that focus should be extremely helpful. I would recommend attempting to recreate your usual abilities, as not only will this give you a familiar framework but allow you to act in accordance with your own experiences.”

“Wait,” Sophie said. “You said that using our essence abilities would be ineffective, but now you’re saying that the best thing to do is use them?”

“No,” Shade said. “I am not telling you to use your essence abilities. I’m telling you to exert your will upon the world around you in a way that replicates the nature of your essence abilities.”

“Which basically means using them while really, really wanting them to work,” Sophie pointed out.

“That is... not entirely inaccurate,” Shade reluctantly conceded. “But I would not call it genuinely representative of—”

“I can see why you're Jason's familiar,” Sophie said. “You're awful at explaining things.”

Jason stood with eyes closed, shutting out everything. He set aside his sense of the world around him, his own body. His emotions, his exhaustion. Reaching a state of empty mind, he was even able to set aside the pain. Each thing he set aside was left for him to examine in his state of meditative calm.

As always, Shade had turned out to be right. Standing apart from them, he could see how much of what he’d considered his core nature to be artificial. In his soul realm, even his mortality was a fiction he created for himself.

The things that were real were all external to himself; aliens to his personal realm. He could sense his friends, moving to his aid. The terrified masses of the brighthearts

underground. There were also the messengers, both his prisoners and those who had arrived with his friends.

The last thing that was real was the pain. That was the power of Undeath, growing like a cancer to take over everything it could. It was the only thing that challenged Jason's absolute control; the only thing that could change the rules of his world. Jason could turn off death and keep his friends safe, but the enemy could revert that change and kill them. That was unacceptable. If there was going to be a fight over his soul, Jason was going to choose the battlefield. He would set up a fight where his friends would not be sacrificed.

He cast off almost every part of himself, cutting them away until there was nothing left but will, power and the resolve to fight. The pain he would have to keep, to let back into himself in order to fight it. He opened his eyes and found himself before the avatar. He moved forward to accept the pain.