

Chapter 783

Fighting Alone

Jason hadn't yet used the ghost fire power he had gained on the undead. Now he was watching the divinely enhanced version engulf the undead like a wildfire, spreading from the defenders as if they were holy arsonists. Any time a weapon, armour or body part touched an undead, flames crawled onto it as if it had been doused in accelerant. The fire passed from one to the other until the entire battlefield was a white, ethereal inferno. Even as they burned, the undead didn't react, continuing to fight in eerie silence, until their bodies were eaten away by the fire.

Jason relaxed his suppression of the undeath energy, unnecessary when all the undead in sight were suffering under the ghostly white flames. Still nursing a divine pact hangover, the chance to let his aura rest was very welcome. Miriam also allowed herself to relax a little, ordering the ranged attackers to take a break. They tended to use the most mana, being heavily made up of spellcasters. They had a chance to recover some of that mana while the flames pushed the undead back for them.

On the battlefield, even the frontliners were taking a rest. Death's miracle had brought respite to the battlefield, although there were no illusions that the job was done. For now, though, there was peace as the piled bodies of the undead were burned to ash and rainbow smoke. The corpses the undead were animated from had been sustained by death magic, preventing them from dissolving. The ghost flames broke that power.

"This is your miracle," Miriam said.

"Death's miracle," Jason corrected.

"What did you sacrifice for this?"

"Not much. Death was looking for a pretext to step in, so it was just a token, really."

Miriam bowed her head, quietly offering a thankful prayer to the god of death.

"You are welcome, Miriam Vance," Death said, appearing next to her.

Jason looked around, seeing that once again, Death had restricted who could sense his presence. His new guise was that of a male elf, pale with sharp features and dark eyes. He wore neat grey clothes in the Yaresh style, less flashy than the outfits of tropical Rimaros. His voice was monotone, cold and hollow as an empty tomb.

Miriam knelt before him, on the rock from which she had been observing the defences. Like Jason, Death floated in the air next to her.

"Thank you, Lord Death," Miriam said, head bowed.

"Stand, Miriam Vance," Death told her. "You still command this battle."

“Of course, Lord Death,” Miriam said, standing and turning her attention back to the fight. She couldn’t help but make side glances at the god, however. She had seen gods her whole life, but this was different. This was no temple or worship square. What she was doing was important enough that a god had appeared. Even if he was mostly here for Asano, he could have hidden from her the way he had from everyone. Instead, he had appeared before her and spoken her name.

“I think you’re distracting her a little,” Jason told Death.

“She will adapt,” Death said. “Her will is strong.”

“She has carried a lot on this expedition,” Jason said. “Including my noob leadership, most of the time. And now she carries your hopes. I can promise you that they are in good hands.”

“I know,” Death said.

Miriam drew a sharp, startled breath, not taking her eyes from the battle. She stood rigid between Jason and the god, head spinning as they casually chatted. Like every child, she had been taught how to act during a god’s visitation to a worship square or a temple. No one had ever told her what to do now.

“Thanks for the miracle, by the way,” Jason said.

“It was an equitable pact, Jason Asano. There is no need for thanks.”

“I’ll thank you anyway.”

“Then I shall thank you again for retrieving my clergy those years ago. Allowing them to be snatched away and locked in stasis, out of my reach, was a grave failing on my part. Doubly so as they could neither live their lives nor reach their deaths. For faith in me they were returned to a world where almost everyone they knew was centuries dead. The places they lived were often unrecognisable, if not gone entirely.”

“How are they reacclimatising?” Jason asked.

“Some better than others. They were happy to learn of your return from the grave. Despite my admonitions at the sentiment.”

Jason noticed the slightest smile tease the corners of Death’s mouth, even as his voice remained gravestone flat. He saw curiosity gnawing at Miriam in her expression but she couldn’t bring herself to ask in front of the god.

“We gods have asked them to leave you be, for the moment,” Death continued.

“Many look up to you in a way that we know you are not yet comfortable with. I would advise caution should you encounter the former Purity priests, however. Those who did not find other faiths have suffered. Many are confused and lost. Some have taken their own lives. Others are angry, and some of that rage is directed at you, irrational as that is.”

“Anger doesn’t have to make sense. And they came by it honestly. Did Purity sanction himself and get replaced by Disguise while they were locked away?”

“Yes.”

“That’s why he rejected all his priests, then?”

“You are correct,” Death said. “Disguise moved slowly and carefully on first adopting the role of Purity. As time passed and the clergy changed with the passage of generations, he moved it painstakingly towards the extreme aspects of Purity’s remit.”

“But a bunch of people who knew the original recipe wouldn’t go for the new spicier flavour.”

“It would have been a risk not worth taking, yes.”

“Do you not feel even a little bad about not telling everyone that Disguise was faking it for centuries?”

“Jason!” Miriam hissed.

“Worry not, Miriam Vance,” Death told her. “I take no offence at Jason Asano’s question. It is one being asked of us all around the world, even by our faithful. Especially by our faithful. Have you not asked that question yourself, Miriam Vance? Even in your own mind?”

“I... have,” Miriam admitted.

“There is no shame in doubt, child,” Death told her, his voice warmer than it had been. “Wisdom comes from knowledge, not ignorance. There is a relationship between gods and mortals, and you were deceived. We were frustrated, as much as our kind can be, but we could do nothing. The hidden gods operate differently from those of us who work in the open. There is a place of worship dedicated to me in every township large enough that we are not worshipped collectively in a single hall. My presence exists everywhere in this world where things live and die. My influence has a home in every city and hamlet, and I employ it every day. Gods like Undeath, Destruction and Disguise have only hidden strongholds that are constantly being hunted. They hoard their power, saving it for their attempts at grand works of depravity. Masquerading as Purity was Disguise’s greatest triumph, and all we could do was watch and wait.”

“For what?” Miriam asked.

“For you to figure out the truth.”

“Me?” Miriam asked, eyes wide and voice an octave higher than normal as she turned to stare at Death.

“Mortals,” Death clarified.

Jason stifled a chuckle as Miriam turned beet red.

“Eyes on the battle, Miriam Vance,” Death reminded her gently.

Miriam let out a whimpering noise as she turned her gaze back to the fight. Her body language was that of a turtle who found itself with no shell to crawl into, despite really, *really* wanting to.

Despite her nervousness, Miriam’s mind was racing. She was concentrating on the changing state of the battle and the reactions of her forces. The commands she issued through group chat showed no indication of her unease at the presence of the god only Asano could see.

She glanced at Jason, showing nothing but complete ease in his body language and his aura. It genuinely looked as if he was unfazed by the undead army, the miracle in front of them or the presence of the god responsible for it. He noticed her look and nodded, absently scratching his ear. Whatever he had given up to have Death turn the tide of battle, she was certain it was not so inconsequential as he claimed. If he didn’t want to say then she wouldn’t push, restricting herself to silent gratitude as she turned her attention back to the battle.

Fresh waves of undead were moving in to replace the massive losses they’d suffered from the flames. Many of the elemental messengers hadn’t been able to fight at all thus far, for fear of their power being drained. The disappearance of the power devouring their magic and the comforting power of divine ghost fire had emboldened them. Miriam only realised how much when they surged into the attack, flying over the frontline en masse.

“Oh, gods damn it all!” Miriam snarled. “We can barely communicate with these things. How am I meant to get them back into tactical positions?”

“It’s good they actually matter now,” Jason said.

“They won’t matter if they get isolated and cut down. We can’t rely on Death’s power forever; this is our fight.”

Jason smiled at Death’s slight nod of approval, although Miriam missed it as she directed the battle lines to adapt to the messengers running wild.

“The tree is the key to the messengers,” Jason said. “I don’t think it has a mind, but it has a will. Maybe I could try and impart your intentions to it?”

“A multi-stage communication line with an entity that has instincts but maybe not intelligence? No way of issuing clear instructions that it may or may not agree with? In battle, Operations Commander, simplicity is what works. Sometimes. Complexity lasts exactly as long as it takes for one thing to happen and the plan is out the window. I appreciate the offer, but issuing commands to an unreliable ally through a game of whispers with a tree is not something I have time to try.”

The actions of the messengers had blown away Miriam's nervousness at the presence of their divine observer as if she'd forgotten his presence. While she'd been explaining to Jason why talking to the tree wouldn't help she'd also been issuing orders across multiple voice channels. Her eyes scanned the field to assess the new situation and look for optimal responses, realigning their forces accordingly. At least the ones that would listen to her.

Jason resumed his aura suppression, using it on the most powerful undead. The gold-rank abominations were too strong for him to entirely suppress, but even partial diminution of their power helped. With their powers diminished and the weaker undead cleared out by fire, the defenders came crashing down on one abomination after another.

"What do you think?" Jason asked once Miriam had stopped barking out constant orders through voice chat. "Is it enough? Will we hold them out of the natural array chamber?"

"Yes. I'm about to order us to push forward and reclaim some of the ground we've given. They'll be back, but it won't be enough. We'll hold."

"Then it's all about the citadel chamber."

"Yes. Fighting back the undead is one thing, but that purple light is another. Once it infests the wall, they're done. Can you push that light back with whatever you're doing to the ambient magic?"

"No. I've felt it growing, and that's not just something in the ambient magic. It's something deeper. The god of undeath is claiming territory, seeping his power into the ground. He's making it his domain. I know that power better than most and it will take more than an aura to stop it."

"Unholy ground?" Miriam asked.

"Yes," Jason said. "I think he's trying to turn this entire underground realm into a massive temple."

"He is," Death confirmed. "Undeath is claiming territory."

"Then what do we do about the wall?" Miriam asked. "Will that fire stop death from expanding his territory over it?"

"No," Death said. "That is why the ghost fire is only half of the miracle I promised."

"What was the other half?" Jason asked.

"Undeath had been liberally spending his influence in this place," Death said.

"Isn't that his whole thing?" Jason asked. "Saving it up his 'interfere with the mortal realm' tokens so he can use them all on the big prize? Also, you didn't answer my question."

“Physical reality is a place of limits, even if we gods have none,” Death said. Jason rolled his eyes as his question still went unanswered.

“Those limits,” Death continued, “are inescapable if we wish to exert our influence on the physical realm. We gods are in balance; an intricate harmony that works much like the natural world does. We are a part of the natural order, after all. Even gods like Corruption, Destruction and Pain have their place. But Undeath is an exception. Corruption exists within the natural cycle, but the concept of undeath is a corruption of the cycle itself. Its god likewise stands apart, not understanding the balance that exists between the rest of us. He cannot understand it because it is his nature not to. We must, therefore, rein him in from time to time.”

“Then why are we even fighting his creepy army?” Jason asked. “Go tell him off. Is that the other part of the miracle? Telling him off?”

“Yes.”

“Wait, really?”

“I have reset the territory he has claimed, quashing his domain, but that is as much as I can do. He has already started building it again and I cannot intervene a second time, even as he continues to act. Balance affects me, just as it does him. He has long garnered his power to influence the mortal realm and now he spends it. His domain has started spreading again and his priests conduct a terrible working in the darkness. The conflict between Undeath and myself is a proxy war now, fought between his priests and your adventurers. I hope you do well.”

Death was gone as suddenly and silently as he had appeared, without so much as a disturbance of the air.

“Did Death just make us his generals in a holy war?” Miriam asked.

“Yep. I’d say that deserves a sandwich but the air here is pretty funky. It’d probably taste weird.”

“How can you be so casual about this?”

“Nothing’s changed,” Jason said. “We were always going to fight. If you get worked up some diamond-rankers, gods or great astral beings take an interest in you, you’ll never get anything done.”

“That does not feel even remotely correct.”

Jason chuckled.

“I get it,” he said. “A god is relying on you and you’re feeling that pressure. But I’ll say it again: nothing’s changed. Put it out of your mind and do what you were already going to do.”

Miriam gave a nervous nod. She would not have let that lack of confidence show to any of her subordinates in the expedition, but Jason was her commander. He was the only one she could go to for comfort and he did his best.

“If we can hold long enough to activate the devices here and in the citadel chamber,” he said, “then we can face them in the transformation zone. There, Undeath’s power won’t be able to reach them. The undead will also be divided up into zones, so the priests won’t be able to influence them until they conquer those zones one by one. Which means that we can beat them. There is a path to victory, Miriam. We just have to walk it.”

She nodded, assuring herself.

“We just have hold long enough for the devices to activate,” she said, glancing down the tunnel behind them. That way led to Clive and the ritualists getting ready in the array chamber.

“Yes,” Jason said. “If the citadel doesn’t have to deal with their wall turning purple and evil, then the defenders there just have to hold against the undead.”

“You’re the one who has been speaking to them,” Miriam said. “Do you think they can?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think; I’m out of things to do about it from here. At this point, all we can do is trust our friends.”

“I don’t have any friends over there,” Miriam said. “I’ve only just met most of these people.”

“Well, I do have friends over there,” Jason said. “And believe me, friends are better than allies.”

“You’re not worried about losing them?”

“Oh, terrified. I’ve lost people before. But if you try and leave them behind for their own protection, they won’t thank you. I lost a brother, a lover and a friend because they decided to fight alongside me. I blamed myself for letting them come along, but I ultimately accepted that they made their own choices. They chose to stand and fight for their world and I had no right to take that from them. We don’t get to do that. I’ve been here before, Miriam. Armies of undead, transformation zones, everything on the line. After I lost those people, I took on the rest of it alone. That helped me realise that what I needed more than anything else was to have the people I trust at my back. This time I do, and I’ll take that over fighting alone every time.”