

Chapter 820

Bit of an Odd Bloke

As soon as the bony hand landed on Jason's shoulder, the world around him swirled into incomprehensible nonsense, like a stick of dynamite going off in a drum of paint. Jason was both familiar and inured to dimensional displacement, so was already moving when the world reformed an instant later. He kicked out behind him, hitting something solid enough that he moved rather than it. He span, spotting an undead creature draped in ragged cloth, only his skull face and skeletal feet showing.

"Garth?"

"Hello, Asano. We meet in person."

The monstrous high priest wasn't moving, seemingly happy to talk, so Jason stopped as well. It gave them both a chance to look around and take in their surroundings. They were standing on a walkway of black and white marble, inside a building straight out of an MC Escher drawing. It was the size of a castle but filled with open space, crossed with walkways, stairwells and arching bridges to nowhere. It was a place of impossible geometry; optical illusions made manifest. None of it had any discernible purpose and shouldn't have been physically possible. Jason could feel the dimensional anomalies that turned illusion into reality.

Jason's void cloak was never affected by the wind and there was none in this space. The air was dead still, chalky on the tongue and dry with the scent of age and abandonment. Yet his cloak whipped around him as if he stood in a gale, impacted by the dimensional anomalies whose proximity to one another stirred up astral winds beyond the touch of mundane senses.

Jason had developed an instinct for understanding astral phenomena and suspected he could perceive enough about the dimensional anomalies to use them in the fight ahead. All he needed was enough time to explore and examine them with his magical senses, which meant stalling for time. He hoped the Undeath priest was a talker, and he seemed to be from the one time they had spoken previously. This time he would not have the safety of using Shade as an intermediary, however.

The dimensional castle was crawling with Garth's undead, for now wandering mindlessly on stairwells and over bridges. Only the walkway Jason stood on was clear, other than for Jason and his foe. Jason couldn't sense any aura, but that was unsurprising. Any gold-ranker with stealth powers should be able to elude him.

For the moment, the priest seemed happy to join Jason in taking in their battleground. When he saw the priest look his way, he faced his enemy in turn. Jason's nebulous eyes of blue and orange met the red glow in the eye sockets of Garth's skull.

"You know," Jason said, "I've been accused of looking sinister from time to time, but I think you've got me beat."

"I'm standing right in front of you," Garth said. "Even so, you're still full of cocksure bravado. You are not hiding behind a familiar this time, Asano. You are mine to deal with."

"You should be careful with statements like that," Jason said. "My friend Clive's wife said the same thing, and that turned into a *whole* mess. I mean, worth it, but still."

"What gives you that confidence?" Garth asked. "I must confess curiosity about what makes you so special. Everyone from my god to my rivals have warned me about you. Not to underestimate you. The importance of killing you. The fact that you, of all our enemies, are the one that can claim this realm and threaten our actual objective."

"I can tell you that, but let's make it a show-and-tell. I'm curious as to how you pulled us in here. This is a messenger duelling power, right? Or something very close. How did you get that power, and how did you get it to work on someone of lower rank than you?"

"Stealing power is a part of my nature," Garth said. "Normally that is something I take great care to hide."

"But not from someone you're about to kill?"

"But not from someone I'm about to kill," Garth confirmed.

The rags wrapped around Garth's body were torn apart as he unfurled all six arms and four legs.

"Strewth. You were playing Skeletor when you were secretly General Grievous the whole time. Not sure that's an upgrade, to be honest. Are you packing lightsabers? I think that'd clinch it."

"I answered your questions. You have yet to answer mine."

"That's fair; my bad, bloke. It was what makes me special, right? It's not just one thing, really. It's more of a situation where I've been in the wrong place at the wrong time so much that now I *am* the wrong place and time, for whatever poor sod trundles into my path. Which, today, happens to be you."

"Clearly, you have something to rely on in this fight. Something significant, based on what I keep hearing about you."

"Would you believe rakish charm?"

"I've spoken to you for some time now, so... no."

Jason laughed.

“That stings a little, I’m not going to lie. Is it weird that I kind of like you? I’m still going to kill you with the great plan I’m definitely not lying about having, but I think we’ve got a good rapport going here.”

“You still haven’t told me the source of your confidence. Is it the power to rise from the dead? I have been warned to kill you until you stop coming back to life. Are you expecting to die, have that fulfil the release condition of the power trapping us here and then flee when you resurrect?”

“No, although now that you say it, that’s pretty good. Wow, thank you. That’s a good plan. I might..”

Jason felt an aura start to rise from Garth, but it wasn't a simple aura projection. It came in fits and starts, like an engine trying to turn over in the cold before finally erupting into life. Jason's jaw dropped, although Garth couldn't see it, shrouded in the dark of Jason's hood.

“You were stalling,” Jason said. “You weren’t just suppressing your aura. You completely turned it off somehow. You were letting me talk so I wouldn’t hit you with a soul attack.”

“You can make soul attacks? The Adventure Society lets you get away with that?”

“It’s not a matter of ‘let’s’ as much as—”

Garth became a blur and one of his bony hands passed through Jason’s head.

Garth’s hand hit no resistance as it passed through Asano’s head, his claw-like hand jutting out the other side. Asano leapt from the side of the walkway they were on, his head unharmed as if Garth’s arm didn’t exist. Garth held out all six hands and a chunk of bone shot from each, going only a short distance before exploding into Razor shards. The tiny blades peppered both combatants but injured neither. Garth’s skeletal frame was unaffected by his own power and Asano’s cloak absorbed them harmlessly.

That exchange had taken place in less than a second, both men blindingly fast. Garth shot larger bone spikes from his hands to intercept Asano, but the strange environment proved tricky. Rather than falling down, Asano fell up, throwing off Garth’s prediction. Most of his attacks missed Asano, only one spike impaling his leg. Asano rose out of sight, moving behind a solid set of stairs.

Garth was not going to underestimate Asano. He had the rank-advantage but he was more general than warrior. His body had been built to serve as a vessel for his god's power, and it was usually when filled with it that he waded into battle himself. By contrast, Asano was clearly experienced at facing more powerful opponents. Whatever the magical

boon to his speed was, it allowed him to face a gold-ranker without being entirely outclassed.

Garth was going to take him time. He would catalogue Asano's defences one by one before taking them, and Asano, apart. He already had an amount of information to go by. The cloak intercepted weak projectiles, which was not too burdensome. It ruled out less powerful blanket attacks, meaning precise strikes would be called for.

To hit Asano with precision, he would need to get past whatever trick Asano had used to avoid his initial strike. Intangibility was the obvious answer, but Garth dismissed the possibility. There would have been some feedback, if only to Garth's newly restored magical senses. It was more likely space manipulation, which didn't bode well. If Asano was versed in using dimensional forces, their battlefield would be to his advantage.

He already knew that Asano could jump between shadows, and they were not in short supply. There was no clear source of light, but the arches and walkways cast shadows onto one another in ways that never quite made sense.

The final question Garth had about the powers he had seen from Asano was his speed. If Asano lost that, he would lose the fight. It was a powerful enhancement, allowing him to almost rival a gold-ranker. That suggested a power that traded off limits or conditions for power, which Garth could potentially exploit. There might be conditional triggers for the power, a lengthy break between uses or a mana cost so high it could only be used in short bursts.

Garth ran the possibilities through his mind, planning out how to test his ideas in future exchanges with Asano. There would be many, as silver-rankers were hard to put down. Some gold-rankers could put one down quickly, mostly assassin types, but that was not Garth. He would dig out Asano's secrets and counter his abilities until, in the end, Asano would die. How quickly was a matter of how annoying he was to bring down.

Inside Jason's soul realm, Marek Nior Vargas slowed his descent through the air until he was floating in front of a portal. With him were two other gold-rank messengers. They all looked at the avatar of Jason standing by the portal, which was situated in an English-style country estate garden.

"I've been trapped in a challenge power by a gold-rank undead who stole it from some messenger," Jason said. "I'd appreciate it if you could jump out and help me."

"Appreciate it enough to let us finally leave?" Marek asked.

"Honestly?" Jason said. "I've been working on that for a while. I have a diamond-rank friend who is approaching the goddess Liberty about smoothing things over so I can let

you go without my own people dragging me over the coals. That's been happening while we're on this little expedition."

"Then we will aid you, Jason Asano."

Marek flew through the portal which started making crackling, hissing and fizzing noises. He was flung back out, a tree exploding as he passed through it, barely slowing down. He did finally come to a stop, at the end of a hundred-metre gouge his passage had dug in the ground.

In the strange dimensional space, Jason closed the portal that was still making strange sounds like electrified popcorn.

"Well, that didn't work."

With his aura back, Garth could spread his senses through the pocket dimension. His ability to sense magic was thrown off by the ubiquitous dimensional energy, but he could feel a clear link to all of his undead. This proved disorienting as his eyes and his magical perception pointed in different directions to the same undead. When one of his undead was destroyed, it took him several seconds to look around and find it.

Asano was on a walkway that, to Garth, was at a ninety-degree angle. Garth tossed an experimental bone spear and it went nowhere near Asano, shifting direction several times in the air. Asano looked to be draining life force from the destroyed undead, despite the fact that it shouldn't have any. He guessed it to be an affliction specialist trick, given their propensity for making things vulnerable to their powers, however implausible.

Asano was being guarded by familiars. One was a swarm type, some kind of lamprey-leech hybrid accomplishing the unlikely task of drinking blood from Garth's lifeless minions. Even though they shouldn't have any. The other was a strange floating creature surrounded by orbs that alternated shooting beams and transforming into shields.

As a zemravore and not an essence user, most of Garth's necromantic abilities came from ritual magic. He did not have the power to easily boost his minions, something he relied on subordinate priests for. On the contrary, Asano's aura was suppressing them and setting them alight with his damnable ghost fire.

Slow, Garth decided. He didn't know how Asano had even an echo of Death's flame but he would find out over the course of Asano's slow and excruciating demise. Then he would animate him taking little care in the ritual. Asano's body would be a weak undead, quickly torn apart by his own friends.

Unable to bolster his undead, the best Garth could do was order them to swarm Asano. Unfortunately, the mindless creatures could not parse the dimensional geography any better than Garth himself. They chased after Asano but ended up roaming helplessly throughout the bizarre building.

Garth watched as Asano handled the undead that found him in an almost leisurely fashion. The silver-rank undead were no challenge, only the rare golds prompting a real fight. The undead were no match for an essence user like Asano, but the battles did reveal more of Asano's power. Each new data point refined the model in Garth's mind of how to kill him.

Garth was at least grateful that his personally animated gold-rank undead had been pulled in through the link. He had been uncertain whether his zemravore abilities could deceive the parameters of the stolen ability to that degree, but they had come through. Losing the gold rank undead to Asano was costly, but worth it for drawing out his abilities.

While Asano fought his minions, Garth attempted to navigate the building himself. He saw Asano transitioning smoothly from one area to the next, completely confident in his direction. If Garth didn't get at least some sense of how to navigate, Asano would always be the one choosing when and where to clash.

Moving from one area to another was disorienting. Subjectively, it felt like everything was oriented normally, but it was just the opposite as Garth's vision told him one thing and his magical senses another.

While he moved, Garth kept an eye on Asano, watching as he revealed his various powers. He was convinced now that Asano's speed was maintained by draining life force from the fallen undead, even though they shouldn't have had life force to steal. The solution was to cut off the supply.

Garth decided to get rid of his minions, although he did not do so immediately. His gold-rankers could still tease out more of Asano's powers and, if he chose the right moment, he had a heart power that might well be able to end the fight on its own. If his undead hadn't been so scattered and disoriented, he'd have used it already.

It was now clear to Garth that Boris Ket Lundi had gone to elaborate lengths to set the odds in Asano's favour. The minions he had insisted on were proving more liability than asset. As for the duelling ability power he had taken from the messenger Boris fed him, it was clear it had been chosen with care. Asano's knack for navigating the strange space was his biggest asset.

When Asano finally brought the attack to Garth, it was far from unexpected. He chose his moment well, though, with Garth distracted in contemplation of a dimensional anomaly.

Asano appeared from a shadow behind him, swinging a black-bladed sword. Garth managed to deflect the attack with a thick plate of bone on one of his many arms, negating whatever afflictions the attack had been intended to inflict. He was not quick enough to counterattack before Asano was gone again, disappearing back into a shadow.

It was not the last attack Asano made but the combatants fell into a *détente*, neither pushing for a conclusive exchange. Asano was struggling to land inflictions or inflict decisive damage while Garth could never pin Asano down. Between shadow jumping and moving through dimensional anomalies, Asano was a ghost. When he tried to follow Asano through an anomaly, Garth simply found himself alone with his undead, Asano somehow in another space entirely.

Garth was not idle in the face of Asano's hit-and-run tactics. His attempts to learn the nature of the anomalies were slowly starting to pay off and he was able to sometimes direct his undead accurately. He did so with care and subtlety, the instances of his directions going wrong helping hide his purpose. Asano, for his part, was paying less attention to the undead in his attempts to strike at Garth directly. Finally, Garth's patient efforts paid off.

It wasn't as many undead gathered into one area as Garth would have liked, but it was enough to surprise Asano when he stepped onto the walkway and saw them all. He only paused for a moment before weaving through them, manipulating space to dodge between them on the way to his next destination. The leeches, currently looking like a blood-red clone of Asano himself, followed along as the nebulous creatures flew overhead.

Watching as Asano ran along what was to him, a ceiling, Garth waited until Asano was fully surrounded by undead before activating his heart power.

Becoming a *zemravore* was something that happened in stages. It culminated in the claiming of a first heart power, with a ceremony marking the transition from the last vestiges of living to a true place amongst the undead. Garth had been proud of the heart chosen for him by the Undeath high priest he served. It came from a creature not native to *Pallimustus*, a celestial hound that had come to their world looking to smite the undead.

It had failed, falling to the very beings it had arrogantly sought to destroy. The Undeath priests ate its flesh, carved from the beast while it was still alive, a ceremonial final meal for Garth. Then he had taken its heart, the last of his skin, flesh and organs sloughing from his body as he took the final step from living to unliving. The final step from simply serving his god to embodying him as one of the undead.

Heart powers had come and gone over the years. It became harder to find replacements as he curated powers that suited him well. The stealth power was a perfect fit and other exceptional powers had come and gone. That first heart, though, the moonlight hound, had always remained. It was not just a nostalgic choice, either. As someone who commanded more than fought himself, who used forces that could be freely expended, he needed a power that made use of the undead at his command. Coming from a creature whose very nature was to destroy the undead, it offered Garth something that perfectly met his while offering something very unusual in the hands of a necromancer.

Garth activated the heart power, letting out a howl in a voice quite unlike his own. It had a pure and fierce quality that did not belong to the undead. The undead, in fact, could not tolerate it at all. Every one of Garth's undead minions exploded, in every area of the dimensional space. The undeath energy did not just detonate but was changed as it did, transformed by the stolen celestial power of the howl.

In the very instant the undead energy detonated, it changed from purple to a transcendent light of blue, silver and gold. All through the strange dimensional castle, undead exploded, flooding the space blinding, transcendent light. Nowhere was brighter than the walkway where Asano and his familiars had been surrounded by undead.

If his skull face wasn't perpetually doing so, Garth would have grinned.

Jason felt like he'd been hit by a train that knocked him into the path of a larger, faster train. The blast had not just annihilated his conjured clothes but the near-indestructible boxer shorts he had spent so much money on. His only remaining possessions were his sword, dropped to the marble floor, and the necklace holding his protective amulet and the shrunken cloud flask.

Even the floor had not gone unscathed. Transcendent damage had scoured the once smooth marble to leave a coarse, pumice-stone finish. Jason grimaced as his nethers scraped against it as he pushed himself onto his hands and knees. He had Colin conjure fresh robes from the biomass within his body, everything outside it having been annihilated. That included Gordon whom Jason could barely sense a connection to. A look over the messages waiting for him confirmed that Gordon had been killed.

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- You have been struck by transcendent damage. Ability [Hegemony] has degraded the damage to disruptive-force damage.
 - All instances of [Guardian's Blessing] from [Amulet of the Dark Guardian] have been converted to instances of [Blessing's Bounty].

- [Blessing's Bounty] is providing an ongoing heal and mana gain effect when your life force and mana are already above the normal maximum. Ability [Sin Eater] allows your life force and mana pool to exceed normal values.
 - An instance of [Blood of the Immortal] has been consumed.
 - [Blood of the Immortal] is providing an ongoing heal effect when your life force is above the normal maximum. Ability [Sin Eater] allows your life force to exceed normal values
 - Vessel of familiar [Gordon] has been annihilated. Familiar [Gordon] is a lesser avatar and is guaranteed to resume the role of familiar when you summon a new vessel with ability [Avatar of Doom].
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Jason grabbed his sword and pushed himself woozily to his feet. He had to be ready in case Garth had gotten his head around the dimensional maze and was en route to attack him. He looked around as the transcendent glow faded, rubbing his sore head in relief as he spotted Garth watching from, in Jason's perspective, the distant ceiling.

The red light in Garth's skull sockets flared, his equivalent of goggling wide-eyed. Asano's cloak was gone but he was standing without apparent injury, looking no more than groggy as he rubbed his messy hair. The transcendent damage hadn't even burned off his hair.

Garth's rage was pushed aside by a sudden sickening pulse from his chest. It was a sensation he knew: heart incompatibility. Some hearts, because of the power they held or the creature they came from, did not play well with others.

The solution was simple enough: get rid of the offending heart. It was another trap of the messenger Garth was increasingly determined to take revenge against. Garth opened the sides of his rib cage like doors and reached in to pluck out the heart. His hand snapped back, flung off the heart with a hiss and crackle of energy.

The heart power was still active. It was the nature of messenger challenge powers that they couldn't be interfered with until the power had run its course. Having never claimed a messenger heart before, Garth had no idea, until that moment, that this meant they couldn't be discarded while the power was active. He was certain, however, that Boris Ket Lundi had known exactly that.

That was the moment Garth realised that he wasn't fighting Jason Asano, and hadn't been from the beginning. Asano was an instrument, deftly played by the messenger as a distraction while he quietly slipped in the knife. The messenger had been fighting Garth long before Garth realised there was even a fight going on. The cuts had been invisible,

the wounds unnoticed. Asano wasn't even the death blow. Boris Ket Lundi had convinced Garth to deliver that to himself.

Garth had been warned long ago to never keep an incompatible heart. It was both poison and bomb, weakening him as it ticked down to the final, explosive destruction. But this heart could not be eliminated while both he and Asano were alive. Until the power ran its course, Garth was stuck with the heart. Boris Ket Lundi had destroyed him, all while relaxing on his distant mountaintop.

Garth looked at Asano who looked back with confusion. There was still a chance. He could force the fight with Asano; put him down before he was killed by his own poisonous heart. It wasn't much of a chance but it was the only one he had. He started moving, heading for the nearest stairs.

Jason's aura flooded out of the pyramid fortress and over the battlefield, cutting off the power enhancements coming from the Undeath priests.

➤ [Party leader \[Jason Asano\] has joined the \[Team Biscuit\] voice channel.](#)

"Sorry about popping off like that. I had a thing."

"Are you alright?" Humphrey asked.

"Yeah, no worries," Jason said. "I just need to grab some fresh underwear and I'll come help you fight some evil."

"Underwear?" Belinda asked.

"I didn't poo myself, just to be clear. It was an underwear mishap related to something else entirely. On an unrelated note, the topic of your wife did come up, Clive. Bit of an odd bloke, that high priest."

"You killed him?" Humphrey asked.

"Actually, he just kind of got lost and then blew up. It was weird."