

Chapter 900

A Lunatic's Nightmare

The mirage chamber in Yaresh was one of the newest in the world and featured the latest design innovations. Seating was arranged by rank, not because of privilege but because the projections in each section were tailored to different perceptual speeds. When gold rank fighters were just a blur to lower-rank spectators, it required a curated experience of replays and slow motion for them to enjoy the experience.

Jason had seen some of this in the VIP section, finding it startlingly similar to sports coverage on Earth. There were even commentators. That audio hadn't been piped into the VIP room, it had been playing quietly in the participant's lounge.

The projections not only slowed things down but allowed the audience to see through things they normally couldn't, like the darkness Jason had plunged the arena into. While it looked impressive to the naked eye, it wasn't conducive to keeping track of the action.

From the stands, the arena was filled with shifting shadows, dancing like a fire that absorbed light instead of shedding it. Just enough of the arena's illusionary sunlight filtered through to create a perpetual murk. Occasional flashes of purple and orange lit up the dark for fleeting moments, revealing glimpses of disturbing silhouettes.

Inside the darkness lurked dark and alien figures. They had a multitude of arms like the branches of barren winter trees. The limbs jutted up from trunks that were vaguely human-shaped, before twisting down like the legs of a spider. Clasped in the pointed fingers at the end of each arm were vicious daggers. Ornate workings of glossy red and black, they would not have looked out of place on a sacrificial altar.

The core bodies of the monstrosities were only the size of a person, but they crowded the arena, leaving no space to hide. What had once been an empty ring of sand was now a bizarre garden of horrors, stolen from a lunatic's nightmare and hidden in the unnatural dark.

In the middle of this was the flashing form of Prince Valdis. Like a fabled hero, he dashed through the nightmare creatures, fending off daggers with his gleaming sword. Too fast for almost anyone to follow, only the projections showed his struggles in any comprehensible way.

Valdis was a gold ranker, and he hadn't gotten there by ever letting himself take the easy way. He'd fought monsters and cultists. Hunted down necromancers and soul

engineers. This was not his first time dancing through the madness of some wizard who turned the world around him into a weapon.

Valdis was as orthodox an adventurer as Jason was bizarre. His essences were common; his ability list full of famous, yet basic, abilities. It was not hard to research what Valdis was capable of, compared to the strange ability combinations Jason was unleashing. Even so, others found Valdis extremely hard to beat. Yes, his abilities were simple and predictable, but they were common as dirt for a reason.

Surprise was all well and good, but surprise worked once. Speed, efficiency and versatility worked every time. Valdis was a sword master first, and everything else second. Everything he did was either to advance his training or eliminate an obstacle to that training. If he hadn't found someone he loved in his team, he wouldn't have married because it would have been too much of a time sink.

The result of all this was that Valdis was not intimidated by the terrifying display Jason was putting on. Yes, it was a field of nightmares, but Valdis had slain nightmares before. His mind was razor focused on what to avoid, opportunities to strike, and ameliorating mistakes already made.

It was interesting that he was fighting the very origin of the System to which everyone now had access. It had told him about the mistake he had made in attempting to cut down all of Asano's familiars. Not only had most of them survived, but it had acquainted Valdis with one of Jason's more annoying abilities.

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- You have sinned.
 - You have suffered 210 instances of [Sin] for attacking [System Administrator] and his allies within his aura. This cannot be resisted, circumventing ability [Sword Soul].
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The message read as if the afflictions were retaliation for attacking the originator of the system, but that was just how the system referred to Asano. This was a function of Jason's aura ability, afflicting any who came after his allies. Even the normally potent affliction-absorbing power Valdis possessed was unable to stop it, although the affliction alone did little. The issue was how it interacted with Jason's other abilities to reduce resistances and increase necrotic damage.

It wasn't hard to get information on Jason's core abilities. They were much less common than those of Valdis, but Jason had been around long enough, and was famous enough, that many of his powers had been tracked and catalogued. The Sin affliction only

increased any subsequent necrotic damage, not dealing any itself. It meant that Valdis needed to avoid follow-up attacks, but avoiding hits was what he did.

Jason's familiars were almost unrecognisable with twisted tree-branch arms sprouting from them. Unlike trees, however, they were extremely mobile. Valdis was constantly on the move as they shadow-jumped through the gloom, constantly occupying the space he was in. It took more than raw speed to evade them, even with the speed Valdis had at his command. Fortunately, he had no shortage of evasion abilities.

Even amongst orthodox sword-masters like Valdis, each adventurer's power set had its own nuances. Valdis' specialty was force projections. Blade projections helped him attack at range or increase his damage up close, but his real signature was afterimages.

He had a slate of evasion powers that left behind images that, at low rank, had been illusions that made useful distractions. At gold rank, they did so much more. Many of his afterimage abilities now produced full force constructs. Some were dangerous and explosive, a threat to anyone trying to hunt him down. Others were hardy, long-lasting and could even fight on their own.

The crowd was eating the battle up and the commentators played up the dark wizard and shining hero narrative.

"Keep an eye on those replays, folks. At any given moment, our valiant prince seems on the cusp of being taken down, only to escape the clutches of sinister sorcery yet again! And remember, this blink-and-you'll-miss-it action is being brought to you by Barrington's Barrels, the best coopers in Upper Fisker! If you're buying a barrel, you'd best be buying a Barrington's Barrels barrel. Gods bedamned, who writes this crap?"

"Ted, they can still hear you. Putting your hand over the pickup doesn't stop the sound projector."

"What? Oh, sorry, folks, there was a little magical issue with the announcement system there..."

Valdis dashed through the arena, barely a blur as his gleaming swords deflected the rain of daggers stabbing at him from every direction. His raw speed, incredible as it was, wasn't up to the task of fending off the forest of blades alone. His abilities left behind afterimages that would fight back and slow down the pursuing familiars, or even explode and wipe one or two of them out.

The afterimages were key to buying Valdis enough breathing room to devise a counterattack. He was still in a constant state of flight, but he was at least free enough to

consider how to turn the tables. The critical point would be identifying where Jason himself was amongst all the shadows and dagger-wielding tentacle arms.

While Valdis was working to give himself space, Jason wasn't idle, sending out an array of spells. All of the familiars echoed his chanting, so Valdis couldn't trace him by sound. It was also impossible to track his location by aura, when every familiar possessed a perfect replica of it. What Valdis suspected Jason didn't know was that he was already sneaking an extra trick from his sleeve.

The advantage of having such a well-known power set was that people didn't expect to be surprised by it. But, as Valdis had learned, that expectation could kill. While the gist of his power set was a surprise to no one, few people outside his own team knew every quirk and nuance. That was especially true as he ranked up, not just from fresh aspects to the abilities but synergies that people weren't expecting.

Valdis couldn't see through darkness with his perception ability, but it did give him perfect awareness of his surroundings within a short distance. It was the cornerstone of his uncanny ability to dodge and deflect attacks, and perfect for someone needing to track a storm of daggers jabbing in from every angle. What was much less known was that it gave him the same ability to sense the space around each of his long-term afterimages. While it seemed like he was being chased around the arena at random, he was, in fact, building a network of perception nodes.

While this was happening, Jason continued his attack. Spells were flung in Valdis' direction, and even he couldn't dodge every attack from the forest of arms. The cuts from the daggers weren't a threat by themselves, but the afflictions they delivered were a different story.

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- You have been struck by special attack [Punish] wielded by [Hand of the Reaper].
 - You have been dealt necrotic damage. Damage increased by all instances of [Sin].
 - You have suffered instances of [Sin], [Wages of Sin], [Thief of Spirit], [Creeping Death], [Rigor Mortis] and [Weakness of the Flesh].
 - Your resistances are reduced by the aura [Hegemony].
 - You have failed to resist.
 - Ability [Sword Soul] has absorbed the afflictions, negating them.
 - Capacity of [Sword Soul] has been diminished.

 - You have been struck by [Ruin, the Blade of Tribulation].

- You have suffered instances of [Ruin of the Blood], [Ruin of the Flesh] and [Ruin of the Spirit],
 - Your resistances are reduced by the aura [Hegemony].
 - You have failed to resist.
 - Ability [Sword Soul] has absorbed the afflictions, negating them.
 - Capacity of [Sword Soul] has been diminished.
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Sword Soul was an extremely powerful defensive ability. Not only did it absorb almost any affliction, but passively buffed his other abilities for any unused capacity. It gave Valdis breathing room against someone like Jason, but he'd never experienced its capacity draining so far or so fast. Many essence users and monsters had a few afflictions, but the rapid depletion of his Sword Soul capacity was more terrifying than all of Asano's theatrics.

There were some afflictions that Sword Soul wouldn't absorb, however. More Sin stacks piled up as the afterimages fought off Jason's familiars. It also didn't stop wounding effects, like Jason's famous bleed attacks.

- You have been struck by special attack [Leech Bite] wielded by [Hand of the Reaper].
 - You have suffered [Bleeding]. [Sword Soul] cannot absorb wounding effects.
 - As you have an existing [Bleeding] effect, you have been drained of health and stamina.
 - You have suffered instances of [Leech Toxin], [Tainted Meridians], [Thief of Life], [Creeping Death], [Rigor Mortis] and [Weakness of the Flesh].
 - Your resistances are reduced by the aura [Hegemony].
 - You have failed to resist.
 - Ability [Sword Soul] has absorbed the afflictions, negating them.
 - Capacity of [Sword Soul] has been diminished.
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- You have been struck by [Ruin, the Blade of Tribulation].
 - You have suffered instances of [Ruin of the Blood], [Ruin of the Flesh] and [Ruin of the Spirit],
 - Your resistances are reduced by the aura [Hegemony].
 - You have failed to resist.
 - Ability [Sword Soul] has absorbed the afflictions, negating them.
 - Capacity of [Sword Soul] has been diminished.
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The bleeding and necrotic damage were stacking up, with all the Sin stacks Valdis had taken, but he was gold rank. It would take more than that to slow him down, let alone put him in real danger. The true threat was his Sword Soul running out, at which point afflictions would start landing on him like bricks from the sky. He needed to hunt Jason down before his Sword Soul was expended, but Asano was making himself hard to find.

Jason was almost indistinguishable from his familiars, wrapped in a cloak he turned black and sprouting the same nest of arms. In the gloom, there was no telling the difference, visually. This was where the experience Valdis had built up came into play. As the son of the Mirror King, Valdis was more experienced than most with people using illusions and mirror duplicates to hide themselves.

Using essence abilities was the key to being a good adventurer. Going beyond them was the key to being a great one. Valdis has spent years learning the hard way how to spot the potential tells that differentiated a magician from their clones, duplicates and illusions.

Some made a mistake with disguising their aura, while others left small visible flaws in their disguise than a keen eye could spot. The real experts didn't make such mistakes, however. The secret to teasing out their real location was in watching behaviour, and that was the case for Asano. His aura control was perfect and the gloom covered minor visual inconsistencies. But Asano and his familiars were not the same entity. Even disguised as his familiar, there were subtle differences in the way he moved.

It shouldn't have mattered. Even with perception powers, Asano was so hard to make out that anyone busy dodging daggers in the dark wouldn't notice. What Valdis had learned from hard-earned experience was that the things that shouldn't matter were often the keys to victory. His network of afterimages wasn't just fending off shadow familiars but also letting him watch them.

One of his afterimage variants lasted a long time, making his search for Asano possible. They were turning red, which he'd never seen before, but whatever Asano was doing, it didn't seem to work. The afterimages were immune to most afflictions and weren't being destroyed, and that is what mattered. They let him keep an eye out, and let him spot one of the creepy arm trees moving a little differently than the others. Without hesitation, he pounced.

Part of being an orthodox human essence user was being very focused on special attacks. Valdis had a smorgasbord of such abilities, for killing things in every situation. Some specialised in cutting down spectral monsters, others in cracking armour or

breaching magical barriers. For Jason, he appeared out of nowhere and unleashed his attack for *absolutely killing the damn thing right now*.

Cross Slash was one of the most common attacks in the world. Easily obtained through the sword essence, it allowed for multiple, near-instantaneous strikes. At low ranks, it was a solid workhorse of a move, useful for dropping weaker creatures in a single hit. As things grew much tougher at silver rank, it became a mana efficient means to pile-on damage. At gold rank, however, it became a different beast entirely.

At gold rank, a mana-intensive, long cooldown variant became available. It could inflict countless strikes so swiftly that it bent time itself to do so. It became such a trump card that Valdis had lost his fight with Sophie Wexler when he was gobsmacked at how she countered it. She had accelerated time herself, perfectly blocking each strike with raw skill, then punched him in his astonished face.

That was not something Jason could do. Valdis' sword passed right through Jason's body before he had a chance to react. Through his neck and through his head. Through his limbs so many times they were not just cut off but cut to pieces, all in a single instant. It was so fast that Asano was still standing when he started to fall apart.