

## Chapter 787

### Thinking Like an Adventurer

Miriam and Jason watched as the elemental messengers chased the retreating undead.

"Why have they given up on the natural array chamber?" Miriam wondered. "Just consolidating forces, or do they know about the rituals?"

"The latter," Jason said. "Knowledge was the one who put the idea in my head of triggering a transformation zone. Gods exist in balance, so I imagine Undeath warning his own forces was fair game."

"I think we should divert some of our people in response."

"Agreed, but we can't just abandon this position and rush back to the citadel chamber. The undead will just go behind us and move on the array chamber again."

"We can select who we send by who will do the most good there and the least here."

"You're the tactical commander. You make the picks."

"Check in with Marla in the citadel chamber. Get a sense of what they need."

"Sounds good."

Jason wandered off while Miriam looked over the adventurers. They were at something of a loss after the enemy's retreat, Miriam having ordered them not to pursue. The elemental messengers had ignored her once again. Jason moved towards the wall of the tunnel, the closest he could get to a quiet spot.

"Mr Asano," Shade said. "Our forces in the citadel chamber have made a discovery. Marla is going to tell you something, and I hope you can remain calm."

Jason narrowed his eyes in suspicion, but Shade was speaking from Jason's shadow, leaving him nothing to glare at.

"They've found out who used the magic cup thing?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Mr Asano, it might be best if—"

"Who?" Jason asked again, his voice an icy blade. "Give me the name."

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Rufus had been fighting alongside Taika, Humphrey and Sophie when the undead retreated and they were told to stand down and rest by Miriam. Team Biscuit was not well suited to fixed defensive positions or being part of a defensive line. Once the fires had come, they had done better, going after the stronger undead while the flames cleared out

the rest. The gold-rank undead weren't the equal of an adventurer of the same rank and the team could handle eliminating one of them without gold-rank assistance.

Like the other adventurers, Jason's team were taking the chance to rest. Belinda conjured camp chairs for them, so they didn't have the choice of the stone floor or corrupted plants withered into black filth by undead energy. They didn't relax completely, alert for an undead turnaround. There was also the disconcerting presence of their Builder cult allies.

All the defenders snapped to alert as a sharp sense of danger erupted to fill the space around them. Most of the cultists and brighthearts were looking around with tense expressions while the adventurers, with their sharper aura senses, quickly realised the source.

Rufus looked over at Jason, whose wide eyes were glaring at nothing, but with a fury that looked like it would melt stone. Jason's aura receded and Miriam moved to calm their unsettled allies. She threw a glance at Jason, her expression making it clear that there'd damn well better be a good explanation.

Jason's eyes focused as he turned to meet Rufus' gaze and opened a private voice channel. It also brought in Farrah, still off working in the natural array chamber.

"What is it?" Farrah asked curtly. "I'm quite busy here."

"Do you know what the Cup of Heroes is?" Jason asked, his voice flat.

"Jason," Farrah said, her voice a warning. "Do not drink from Hero's mug."

"He didn't offer it to me. He offered it..."

Jason drew a sharp breath and let it hiss out through clenched teeth.

"...he offered it to Gary."

Neither Rufus nor Farrah responded immediately, shocked silence reigning on their voice channel until Rufus asked a hesitant question.

"Did he accept?"

"Yes," Jason said, sounding defeated.

"Gods damn it, Gary," Farrah said.

"He's apparently the reason that the citadel chamber wall is still holding," Jason said, doing a poor job of sounding positive. "The time we have for you to complete the ritual is time that he bought us. The undead have been pulled from going after your chamber, and he's probably the reason for that too. We're going to send some of our people to buy some more time."

"Rufus," Farrah said. "How bad was Jason when he heard?"

"His aura rattled some people. It wasn't so bad, or you'd have felt it from there."

“Good,” Farrah said. “Jason, do not let this make you go off and do something crazy. We need you for what comes next, so no going off and wrecking yourself by tapping into your soul realm to do something ridiculous.”

“I know.”

“You better know. How many times have you had your back to the wall and your solution was calling on some power, whatever the price? You had no intention of accepting the World-Phoenix's blessing, but when you needed to break into an astral space to rescue me, you let your fundamental nature be transformed. When you needed to portal people out of a place you couldn't, you used a reality core to overcharge yourself to the point it took magic we didn't know existed to keep you alive. If Gary has drunk from the Cup of Heroes, he's following your shitty example, and he doesn't come back from the dead. So, if you want to be a hero again — and we could really use some heroes right now — then figure out how to fight smarter instead of yanking yet another fistful of magic out of your ass.”

Jason and Rufus stared at each other while Farrah yelled at Jason through voice chat.

“And you'd best believe that Gary is going to get the same...”

Farrah broke off, her second tirade cut off by a sob before it could get started.

“I need to get back to work,” she said angrily and left the voice channel.

Jason's fury had been washed away by Farrah's words. He shared a look with Rufus, each feeling the same mix of anger, hopelessness and loss.

“Is this what it feels like?” Jason asked. “Is that what it feels like every time I—”

“Yes,” Rufus said.

“I'm sorry.”

“So you should be. Now, follow Farrah's example and get back to work.”

Rufus strode off in Miriam's direction. Jason was about to do the same when he found someone standing in front of him. He looked human, wearing plain armour and carrying no weapon. Jason looked around and saw that no one reacted to the divine presence. Even the people that had been watching him after his aura outburst were suddenly shifting their attention as if they'd forgotten his very existence.

“You're really going to show your face right now?” Jason asked.

“I am sorry about your friend, Jason Asano. But you understand the choices here more than most, I think.”

“My friend just gave me an earful for understanding.”

"Do you think I like what I do? My name is Hero, yet I will never be one. I have spent my entire existence finding the greatest people on their darkest days, turning their likely deaths into certain ones. I've seen glorious deaths on grand battlefields, immortalised in tapestry and stained glass. I've been the only witness to sacrifices that went completely unnoticed. Countless lives saved by heroes unremembered and unsung by all but my priests."

"Cool story, bro. I've got a thing, so if you've got some kind of point you're rounding up on, I'd appreciate you getting on with it."

"Each god has a role that defines our mandate to influence the world, determining the nature and degree of our influence."

"So, that's a 'no' to getting on with it?"

"I do have a point to make, Jason Asano, and I do not make it lightly. When a god speaks, it is not without purpose."

Jason opened his mouth to speak, then clamped his mouth shut with a grimace. He'd told Death he would try to be more respectful, and as angry as he was, Hero had been right. He understood sacrifice more than most.

"Alright," he said. "Speak your piece."

"Few gods have as little influence as I, or are so restricted in its use. If heroes are given all they need, then they are not truly heroes. Even my priests gain no miracles from me without doing something very ill-advised. But there are times we can shift the normal limitations. I can act to counterbalance other gods like Coward, Dominion or Despair."

"I get it. You've just got the one miracle, and the one condition to use it."

"You have three times met conditions for my intervention, but I either could or did not intervene for various reasons. The first instance was when you faced a silver-rank monster when you were only iron, to give a village time to evacuate. If you had needed to defeat that monster, rather than simply distract it, I would have offered you the power to do so. For only distraction, I knew that you would refuse."

"No kidding."

"The second time was when you chose to engage the Builder's vessel in personal combat. In this instance, you were in an astral space beyond my area of influence. I only know of this event from stories, and I would not be surprised to learn there are more from your time back in your own world. The final time you opened the door to my intervention was when you overcharged a portal and almost killed yourself in the process."

"People keep bringing that up today."

"I did not intervene there because there was no point once you supplied the power to open the portal yourself. My miracle would only have taken your death from a near certainty to an absolute one."

"Maybe you should expand your miracle repertoire. Add something non-lethal."

"I would very much like that, but there are dangers. My kind do not change with the ease that mortals do, or even other kinds of transcendent. The repercussions of change for us are hard to predict, often indirect and rarely positive. This is especially true for one as specific as myself. Compare me to Purity, whose nature had had many more aspects than I, yet his change was such a debacle. The magnitude of the unintended consequences his act set in motion created so much misery."

"Why did Purity turn himself into an artefact? What did he hope to accomplish?"

"I cannot be certain, only make guesses. The god of Purity is one with both very positive and negative aspects. You understand this, I believe. There was a war that engulfed a continent as a human-dominant empire sought to spread a very specific concept of what it meant to be pure. It was a time when Purity was in danger of being seen as one of the dark gods. That empire was where the Order of Redeeming Light was born."

"I thought the order was founded when fake Purity was in charge."

"As do most, but this is not the case. What Disguise made of the order is something else, but the seed had already been planted. I believe that Purity intended to refocus the very concept he embodied, following the fall of that nation."

"He picked a crappy way to do it."

"Indeed he did. Perhaps, then, you can see why I am wary to make changes to my own nature."

"I guess. It feels like maybe you could try something less drastic, though. Now, why are you here? I need to go help my friend you killed."

"I spoke on pushing the limits of my influence. Much of how we use our influence is a matter of pretext, and you have done enough that I can push those limits. Not enough to produce or alter a miracle, but enough to give you a gift, much as Healer did."

Hero held out his hand which contained an orb filled with blue, gold and silver light. Jason possessed an identical orb, given to him by Healer. He reached out and took this second one.

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Item: [\[Genesis Command: Source\]](#) (transcendent rank, legendary)

*The authority to link power. (consumable, magic core).*

- Effect: Assign or reassign a source of power. Requirements of use vary by the nature of the origin and destination of the power
  - Uses remaining: 1/1
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"It is the best I can do," Hero said, his tone apologetic, and was gone.

Eyes snapped onto Jason as if everyone suddenly remembered that he existed. He put the orb in his inventory as Miriam strode up to him, shaking her head as if shaking off sleep.

"Did you contact Marla?" she asked.

"Sorry, no," Jason said.

"Death again?" Miriam asked. "Hanging around you, I'm starting to recognise the feeling of my perception being divinely pushed aside."

"The gods have done enough," Jason said without answering. "It's time Undeath stopped worrying about Death and Hero, and started worrying about us."

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Jason, Miriam and Marla discussed the best approach for adventurer reinforcements. Jason and Miriam being in one area and Marla being in the citadel made the conversation logistically awkward. Jason could speak with Miriam in person or to Marla through Shade, but the two women could not speak with each other directly. He settled on Shade acting like a translator, relaying to each leader the parts of the conversation they were otherwise not privy to.

"Your friend's intercession has tipped the scales in terms of reacting to wall breaches," Marla said. "As it stands, we won't lose out because of gaps in the wall. That means we can stand as long as the wall itself does. That's time we desperately needed, but it won't last forever. We're waiting for word that the ritual is ready on your side."

"An hour, maybe two," Jason told her. "Somewhere in the middle, most likely. Will the wall last that long?"

"Right now, I'd say yes. But the god's fire dimming means we'll be dealing with raw numbers again soon. Doubly so if the forces attacking you are moving on us. It doesn't matter if they're all weak; they can bring the wall down through sheer weight of numbers."

Jason waited for Shade to finish repeating Marla's words, giving Miriam a chance to respond.

"It sounds like what you need is someone to thin out the numbers on the weaker undead," Miriam said. "None of our gold-rankers are ideally suited to area attacks, but one of our silver-rank teams is."

"Silver-rankers are fine, so long as they can deal with the numbers," Marla said after her own delay. "Oddly enough, we can handle the more powerful threats. Their numbers are low enough that the gold-rankers and our Hero-enhanced warrior are dealing with them. What we need is more clearance of the sheer mass of undead we expect will be coming for us at any moment."

"I'll send you team Storm Shredder," Miriam said for Shade to pass on. "They come from a kingdom where the adventurers like to specialise, and their specialty is killing a lot of things at once. Good enough?"

"Good enough," came Marla's answer. "I need to get back to commanding the defence, but send them as soon as you can."

Shade retreated into Miriam's shadow as she turned to Jason.

"Will you join them?" she asked. "The rest of your team don't have strong area attacks, but I could attach you to team Storm Shredder. Your butterflies could be valuable if you can make them work."

"Whether I can is definitely a question," Jason said. "My concern is the Undeath priests that are sure to be directing the attack on the wall. Intelligent enemies have a habit of shutting down my butterflies before they reach the critical mass where they can't be stopped."

"You'll stay here, then?" Miriam asked him.

"Actually, I would like to go, and I want to take Emir and Constance Bahadir with me. I had an idea, and I need people who can safely capture some gold-rank undead without destroying them to make it work."

Jason proceeded to explain his idea to Miriam, who agreed.

"Having some gold-rankers will help you get through the death chamber unscathed," she said. "Gather them up and go immediately."

Jason nodded and got moving, issuing orders through voice chat.

Farrah had been right, Jason realised. His essence abilities had been stalled out since he hit the wall of silver back on Earth and were only starting to crawl forward again. It was his spiritual powers that had grown, and he'd paid the price for that. When faced with dangerous challenges he'd become too reliant on pulling out some crazy power or bullying with his tyrannical aura. He had to fight smarter with the tools he had instead of wrecking himself with reckless improvised power. It was time to stop thinking like an astral king and start thinking like an adventurer again.