

## Chapter 898

### People Think You're Blowing Up Cities

Shortly after visiting Yaresh, Jason and Sophie had participated in a fighting arena. The venue, like most of the city, had been wiped out during the messenger invasion. As part of the reconstruction, the old arena was replaced with a massive mirage chamber. The domed building, constructed from hexagonal segments of stained glass, was a landmark that curved high over the trees.

Mirage chambers created false environments where people could be projected into as illusionary doubles of themselves. Because these illusion bodies were made using soul projection, the real body could experience everything their replicas did. This meant that pain was real, but the only actual harm they faced was psychological. The doubles could be injured or even die without the real body suffering the same.

Smaller mirage chambers were used for training purposes, such as the one at the Geller family training centre in Greenstone. Massive arena venues, like the new one in Yaresh, were designed for public spectacle. These were magical colosseums where the dead gladiators respawned at the end, ready to fight another day. The gladiators here were also not slaves. Dedicated mirage fighters were akin to sporting stars on Earth, earning wealth and fame for their skills.

Despite the existence of such celebrities, however, the biggest spectacles came from the inclusion of famous adventurers on the drawcard. Whether against one another or the local professionals, adventurer participation always pulled in crowds. This was amply demonstrated by the full seating around the arena, despite the short notice of the current event.

The Duke of Yaresh was in the largest of the VIP boxes. The size of a ballroom, it had one glass wall that looked out onto the arena, and could also serve as a projection screen when powers and the environment obscured the action. It wasn't the fighting that the duke was here for, however. Inside the room right now was arguably the most prestigious gathering the city had ever seen. With Yaresh attempting to re-establish itself as a regional power, social gathering like this would help mark it as a place of influence and power.

That Yaresh had not just one but two resident diamond rankers was an incredible boon. Lord Charist was the more social of the two, but it was the more reclusive Lady Allayeth who graced the room with her presence today. Around her was the team she had

raised up herself, Moon's Edge, now famous in their own right. Compared to some of the others present, however, they were practically anonymous.

The duke had — in private — laughed like a madman as internationally famous adventurers descended on his city, one after another. Team Biscuit has been on the rise for years, much of their early reputation built right here in Yaresh. Not only were they known for their success in the field, but also boasted many impressive members.

Gellers were always noticeable, of course, especially the son of Danielle Geller. They also counted the Archchancellor of the Magic Research Association in their number. He was famous as much for the Magic Society's hatred of him as the success of his fledgeling organisation. Then there was a former holder of the Hurricane Princess title. Zara Nareen wasn't *technically* a princess at the moment, but anyone who thought she was genuinely ostracised from the Storm Kingdom's royal family was a political buffoon.

In the cavalcade of famous adventurers descending upon Yaresh, Team Biscuit was only the beginning. Team Blood and Gold had a husband-and-wife duo from the Remore family, plus the vaunted treasure hunter, Emir Bahadir. Team Shining Scabbard was a well-known group who apparently knew Team Biscuit from years earlier. They also had royalty in the group, although that was less impressive with the Mirror Kingdom's surplus of princes and princesses. That said, the duke admired the administrative prowess of Prince Valdis in assembling the arena event in less than two days.

There were others as well. Danielle Geller was talking with the enormous Adventure Society official who mercifully hadn't brought his axe. There were also some local luminaries, although they seemed less impressive in this company. Notable in their absence were certain members of Yaresh high society known for letting their petty pride create diplomatic issues. The duke was pleasantly surprised at not only their absence, but their failure to come to his door, complaining at their exclusion. If he got nothing else from the night, he intended to learn how Prince Valdis had managed that minor miracle.

The duke moderated himself while circulating amongst the visitors. As valuable as these connections were, he was cognisant of this being a genuine social event. These were actual friends, reuniting after a long time apart, not a calculated political exchange. The inclusion of select locals demonstrated the political dexterity of the Mirror Kingdom prince.

The duke was diligent in his attention to all the attendees, not just those who were famous adventurers. This proved wise when the fashion designer turned out to be one of those octuplet sets that every major city seemed to have one of. The duke was careful not

to offend any gods, let alone one as important as Fertility, and it reminded him to be wary of dragons lurking around Jason Asano.

The person this gathering had been arranged for was the one the duke knew the least about. He had heard a great deal, but little of it seemed reliable. The stories surrounding Asano were contradictory, nonsensical and often straight-up unbelievable. Even so, he was unable to dismiss them out of hand. Too many had been confirmed by people whose judgement he trusted.

Asano himself was standing in front of the glass, watching the matches below. The duke was patient, and perhaps a little trepidatious, given what he wanted to discuss. More than just taking a measure of the man, the duke needed to know if Asano's return heralded the same chaos as it had in the past.

The duke moved to stand next to Asano when the stocky elf he was speaking with headed for the buffet table. Asano greeted him somewhat standoffishly, not taking his eyes from the match below. The duke followed his gaze to see Prince Valdis once again in a fight. An enthusiastic and repeat participant, his sword master specialty excelled against other essence users.

The prince was fast, elusive and made powerful hit-and-run strikes in a skirmisher combat style. It had proven effective in duels against even the prestigious adventurers gathered around, and made a grand spectacle for the citizens of Yaresh. Its biggest weakness was against evasion-type protection specialists, as a dark-skinned woman with silver hair was demonstrating.

The duel came to an end, the prince taking his rare loss in stride as he played up to the crowd. The illusionary arena of sand and stone vanished, revealing the very full stands arrayed around the mirage chamber. The duke stood beside Asano, watching the prince walk off as the next challenger came out.

"That is her husband, yes?" the duke said.

"They haven't married yet. Soon, I expect."

"Who do you think will win?"

"She will. Humphrey is well-trained, but he's a monster fighter at heart. He was trained to work in a team, fighting hordes and giants, not people. He's good at it, don't get me wrong, but Sophie is something special. She learned to fight in a cage, where losing meant waking up in a ditch, or chained to a bed. That breeds a determination to win that's hard to match."

The duke found himself a little confused. Some of his advisors had warned that being in Asano's presence was intimidating, but he found it not the case at all. Asano radiated nothing more than a polite amount of aura that revealed his rank.

"You have a remarkable and loyal group of friends, to come running from across the world."

"I do," he agreed warmly. "I simply wish I didn't find myself removed for them for so long. Or so often."

The duke steeled his resolve. He's been told that blunt honesty was the best approach with Asano, but that seemed dangerous.

"I hope you will forgive my rudeness, Mr Asano, but will you be staying in Yaresh long?"

"No. Worried I'll cause trouble?"

"Cause might be the wrong word, and I certainly want to make no accusations. That being said, Adventure Society branch directors have standing orders to go on low alert should you arrive in their area. That order was reissued when they got word of your return."

"That seems a little excessive."

"Perhaps so, Mr Asano. But when you went to Rimaros, the Builder almost dropped another city on it out of the sky. There's a new island there now. Here in Yaresh, the messengers tore the city down to the foundations."

"The Builder attacked everywhere, as did the messengers. We only came to Yaresh because you were already fighting the messengers here."

"But you cannot deny that both forces seem more interested in you than other adventurers. And from here, you went to the brightheart city which, to my understanding, you entirely wiped from reality."

"I built a new one."

"And a very nice one it is, but I believe most people are happy with the cities they already have."

"Well, the brighthearts weren't. Theirs was an undead wasteland."

"So I understand. But the fact stands, Mr Asano, that cities have a habit of requiring significant rebuilding after you've passed through."

"I do want to claim extenuating circumstances," Asano acknowledged, his tone weary but amused. "But there's only so many times every city you visit can blow up before people think you're blowing up cities."

Relief flooded through the duke. He saw a small smile cross Asano's lips and realised the man was probably reading his emotions. It was rude, but also a little impressive. It was hard to do so unnoticed on someone of the same rank, even if the duke got to gold rank through monster cores.

"You've been to Rexion?" Asano asked.

"Many times. I was not being obsequious when I said it was a very nice place. The relationship with Rexion was critical to feeding my people in the early days of the reconstruction. We're still in the process of restoring the wider region, even now. Remnants of the apocalypse beasts unleashed by the messengers took years to fully root out. Even now, we can never be entirely certain we got them all."

The duke shook his head before continuing.

"Whole towns were depopulated, and trying to get people to move in and restart the farms was difficult. There was a lot of reluctance, and understandably so. Whole towns full of people who died under extremes of misery and violence? Seeing family members transformed into monsters and puppets? Quite aside from the trauma people need to confront, those are conditions for spawning some of the nastier kinds of undead."

"I saw something similar in the original brightheart city."

"No Undeath priests here, thankfully. There were some regular necromancers, but the Adventure Society deal with them quite aggressively."

"It sounds like you've had your work cut out for you."

"Indeed. Before the messengers, there were always those looking to snake my position. Sniping politicians and backstabbing noble houses. Now they've spent a decade praying for my good health. No one wants to be duke when it means rebuilding the whole damn duchy from nothing."

"And now that you're seeing results, you don't want the city destroying guy to tear it all down again."

"I do not mean to accuse or offend, Mr Asano, nor am I asking you to leave. But yes, I fear what your presence means for us. When fate places someone at the centre of events, it is those around them who tend to suffer."

"Something I have sadly come to learn. I understand, Duke, and sympathise with your position."

"Thank you. I won't pretend to understand the events you find yourself at the centre of. I am simply asking if your return signals a threat to Yaresh of which I am unaware."

"Not that I'm aware of, Duke. But it's the one you don't know about that gets you, isn't it?"

“Yes,” the duke agreed. “Yes, it is.”

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Jason watched the duke move on to other conversations as Farrah took his place. Humphrey had lost, as predicted, but had made it harder on Sophie than expected.

“You’ve been dodging me,” Jason said, keeping his gaze fixed on the arena. “Odd behaviour for a reunion.”

“Yeah,” Farrah conceded, more subdued than he was used to.

“Something to do with you still being silver rank?”

“Yeah.”

Jason’s team had all reached gold. Rick Geller’s was getting there, with Rick and his sister Phoebe both having done so recently. The rest of their team were in the upper reaches of silver.

“We need to have a decent talk about things,” Farrah said. “And I suppose I have a choice to make.”

“Yes,” Jason said softly.

“I felt it, you know? The moment you became... whatever you are now. The System showed up for everyone, but I *felt* it.”

“I know. Have you talked about it with anyone?”

She shook her head.

“Did you know?” she asked. “When we formed that bond. When we strengthened it. Did you know?”

“No. Neither of us knew, back then.”

“Dawn didn’t tell you something?”

“I don’t think even she knew. There are things she told me that she was absolutely wrong about. What’s happening with me — with us — is probably not unique, but it’s rare. Even by cosmic standards. We’re making up the rules as we go.”

He turned to look around the room behind them, their conversation kept private by his aura.

“We can have this out properly when we’re alone,” he said.

She nodded.

“It is good having you back, Jason.”

She walked away and Rick Geller moved to join Jason in her place. They watched his sister walk out to meet Sophie in the arena.

“You and me in a mirage chamber again,” Rick said.

“Don’t remind me,” Jason responded.

“You say that as if you weren’t the one who had his whole team stomped by someone who didn’t know magic even existed a year earlier.”

“By running around like a fool and cackling like a witch. Surely, it’s been long enough that those recordings are all gone.”

“Are you kidding? It’s required training material at the family training centre. I didn’t hear the end of it when I spent a year instructing in Greenstone.”

Jason waved over a server, grabbing glasses of wine for himself and Rick. Then he held up his glass.

“To Jonah.”

Rick’s eyes soften and he clinked his glass to Jason’s.

“To Jonah,” he echoed, then drained the glass.

Jonah had been a member of Rick’s team until the ill-fated expedition from Greenstone that had killed many adventurers, including Farrah. Jonah had been captured and implanted with a star seed by the Builder cult, and died in the process of having it extracted. He had been part of the group that fought Jason all those years ago, in the Geller mirage chamber.

Rick nodded to Jason and then moved on. The next person to circulate Jason’s way was Clive, holding a notebook. He was shoved out of the way by an excited Prince Valdis.

“Jason! When are you going to get out there? Everyone wants to see how you got to gold rank when you spent the last fifteen years sitting in a magic box meditating or whatever.”

“That’s not really how it worked.”

“Then show us!”

“Sorry about him,” Sigrid said, also moving past an increasingly cranky Clive.

“I’m not sure that me going down there is a good idea,” Jason said. “Mirage chambers are soul projection devices. I don’t know how they’ll interact with my avatar, which is also a soul projection device.”

“You’re just scared of how badly I’ll beat you, aren’t you?”

“You got me, Valdis. I’m just scared.”

“Or harder to provoke than a nine-year-old,” Sigrid muttered.

Clive, watching the exchange, turned to the room.

“Hey everyone!” he announced. “Who wants to see Jason Asano in a proper gold-rank fight?”

Jason gave Clive a flat look as the room filled with cheers.