

Chapter 694

Doubt, Fear and Hesitation

A messenger slammed into Jason and they both went tumbling to the ground. Similar attacks had struck Humphrey, Clive and other adventurers around the battlefield. Jason rolled away from one another and felt some manner of power settle over him. His magical buffs vanished. His conjured items, cloak and robe, crumbled into dust. His aura was fully restricted, but not exactly suppressed. It felt more like there was an invisible cloud surrounding his entire body, preventing him from projecting any aura through it. That cloud felt familiar, like the boundary of a soul, meaning it was most likely impregnable.

A system window appeared, flickering like a TV with a bad signal.

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- All magical effects have been negated. This does not trigger any secondary effects.
 - All conjured items have been eliminated. This does not trigger any secondary effects.
 - All magical items have had their abilities suppressed. This does not trigger any secondary effects.
 - None of your familiars can manifest. All existing familiars have been unmanifested and passive familiar abilities have been disabled.
 - All magical abilities have been suppressed. This does not trigger any secondary effects.
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Jason barely had time to read it before the window sputtered and blinked out entirely. He pushed himself to his feet, watching the messenger do the same. That was something he'd never seen before as messengers always floated to their feet using their auras. Yet, here was one who pushed herself up with her hands and stood with her feet on the ground instead of floating over it.

Jason noted that her appearance also diverged from the standard for many messengers. They frequently favoured diaphanous materials with little practical or protective value, more concerned with their image as beings of power and glory. This messenger looked more like an adventurer, with practical leather armour and a pair of long-handled axes. Her elbow-length leather gauntlets had reinforced knuckles and serrated blades running up the outside of her forearms. This matched the blades of her axes, the edges also serrated. They very much looked like the intention was to maximise not damage but fear and pain, making shallow tears in flesh rather than deep cuts.

Her gear was incongruous with her facial features. She was beautiful, as all messengers were, but it was not the sharp beauty of a sword. Her face was cute, sweet and soft, her dark hair cropped into a short and practical pixie cut. Standing at more than

seven feet tall did oddly little to change the impression. She looked, to Jason's eyes, maybe sixteen or seventeen, although he knew she was likely much older.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"By the reckoning of this world, it is my eighteenth year. I will be young to have such glory as will come to me today."

Jason sighed.

"This one's going to feel bad," he muttered to himself.

At that moment, Sophie and Rufus attacked her from each side in a pincer strike. Both were blocked by an energy barrier that froze them in place for a moment before hurling them both away. The messenger looked at them with a scoffing laugh before turning back to Jason.

"I am Tera Jun Casta," she announced proudly, "and it is your ill fortune to meet me. I was not the one chosen to test you, Jason Asano, but I will be the one to kill you. It is I that will wipe clean the stain of your heresy and reap the glory that comes of claiming your head."

"Okay," Jason said with the resignation of an office worker being handed a fresh stack of paperwork. "Good luck with that."

He was now garbed in boxer shorts, boots and a potion belt with his scabbard hanging from it. His sword dangled loosely in his hand and the necklace with his magical amulet and shrunken cloud flask hung from his neck.

"You may be arrogant now, Asano, but—"

"If I'm being entirely honest," he interrupted her, "I was pretty arrogant before now, as well. My surname is Asano and my personal name is Jason, and I have a slight flaw in my character."

"You will not be so glib once you realise the situation you are in!" she declared in a hurried half-yell, as if to preclude his butting-in again.

"You clearly don't realise who you're dealing with," he told her "Glib is kind of my thing. And I understand the situation perfectly well."

"Is that so? You are in for a rude surprise, Asano."

"I love surprises. And rudeness, for that matter. What have you got for me?"

She scowled.

"You are no doubt confused as to what has happened to your powers."

"Nope. You used an ability that encapsulated us both in your soul, meaning that we're impervious to outside harm unless they bury us alive or something. I imagine that both our power sets are fully suppressed and that we'll stay sealed away until one of us is dead.

Maybe there's a secondary release mechanism where, after a certain time, either we both get released or both get killed."

The messenger's eyes went wide.

"How can you possibly know that?"

"It's called context clues. I think you need to get out and see the cosmos a bit. Does inter-dimensional conquest have a gap-year program? Have you ever heard of Rumspringa?"

"I don't understand your foolish prattle. Speak plainly."

"You messengers travel between universes, right?"

"That is within our power."

"You should find a quiet one and try a little self-discovery. Have you read *Eat, Pray, Love*? You could do a liberal arts degree. You need to expand your horizons is what I'm saying."

"I see what you are doing. Babbling to mask your fear."

"Actually, I'm stalling while I check if I can do anything about this barrier with my aura. No luck, sadly; your soul has us locked down tight."

"You will be free when I wrench your head from your body."

"Try and get the spine to come with it if you can. Hold it up and let it dangle for a moment. If I've got to go, there are worse ways than a classic fatality. I don't suppose you have ice powers by any chance?"

Elseth Culie, the elven affliction specialist, was doing her best to slow down the fresh wave of monsters digging at the bunker underneath the ruined entertainment district. With the messengers having given up their safe but conservative strategy, they were suffering more losses but their summoned minions were freer to complete their task.

Rufus and Sophie had taken on the role of shielding Elseth as she worked, her previous guardians scattered or occupied fighting messengers. In between spells, Elseth looked over at where John Miller and a messenger were shrouded in a power that had deflected both Sophie and Rufus' attempts to intervene.

"Most of the messengers and adventurers started fighting right away," Elseth pointed out. "What do you think they're talking about? And why is he in his underpants?"

"The answer to almost any question you have about Jason," Rufus told her, "is that it's better if you don't know."

"He's probably telling her that something is kind of his thing," Sophie added, eyes scanning the sky above them for threats.

“What is his thing?” Elseth asked.

“Melodrama,” Rufus said. “And I hear the messengers are just as bad. Their fight may come down to who can best capture a sense of mournful longing as they stare off into the middle distance.”

“Yeah, like you’ve never done any brooding,” Sophie told him.

Tera Jun Casta tired of Jason’s words and lunged to the attack. He immediately recognised that she seemed comfortable fighting with her abilities suppressed, which was hardly a surprise given the nature of her duelling power. Her style was practised but orthodox, for the most part. She didn’t try anything elaborate, simply trying to make her serrated axes meet flesh as efficiently as possible.

The wild card was her wings, which she used to supplement her clean, efficient axe work. Her feathers were a dark red-brown, like her hair, with a tough, leathery texture. The wings held up well to slashes from Jason’s sword as she made liberal use of them. Whether as a weapon to batter him, an obstacle to lead him or a shield to block him, she made good use of them.

While she used the wings effectively, it was not a tactic that Jason found overwhelming. He had fought bizarre creatures by the thousands in six years of adventuring, and it had been a long time since he considered a humanoid, even a tall one with wings, as exotic.

Without his powers, Jason was forced to become more aggressive. This was where sparring with Sophie, Rufus and Humphrey paid off, as they were all aggressive in different ways. His model for this was Sophie, as while their styles had diverged over time, they retained the same root in the Way of the Reaper.

Rufus had always been ruthless about Jason training for the worst-case scenarios, but he always had trouble getting Jason to be more straightforward. Jason always got caught up in tricky strategies and roundabout tactics, which he infused into every combat scenario.

Jason had full access to the Way of the Reaper’s techniques, courtesy of the largest skill books he had ever seen. The reality was, however, that there were only so many that Jason had mastered. While he had made the ones he used the most his own, the majority he could use, but with a rote-learning comprehension that anyone truly skilled would look down on.

Jason switched up his style frequently to keep the messenger on edge, not knowing how he would face her next. One moment he was fighting at the limits of her reach and the

next dashing in past the long hafts of her axes. A backflip kick to the chin led into a more acrobatic style, leading her on a merry dance through the levelled buildings of the entertainment district.

At first, it worked. The impetuosity of youth quickly had her frustrated and making mistakes, although Jason failed to capitalise. The weakness of his over-elaborate approach meant that he wasn't landing the kind of heavy, repeated hits required to take down a silver-ranker. They were extremely tough and healed fast, making a victory without powers to amplify damage hard to achieve.

Jason's failure to do significant damage turned the balance of the fight against him. While Tera was young, she had been fighting her entire life, giving her triple Jason's combat experience, at least in years. Once her mind settled, she realised his flaws and that she did not share them. Her vicious weapons and straightforward style were built around winning this kind of fight.

Jason realised that he needed to stop getting caught up in flights of fancy about how to fight. Time and again, Rufus had told him that there were times when all the tricks in the world didn't matter. Sometimes it was about the willingness to be brutal and the resolve to endure brutality. Some fights couldn't be danced around or subverted. Sometimes you had to stand up, take the hits and hit back harder.

When he finally accepted this, the tenor of the fight changed. Jason faced off against Tera inside what he guessed had once been a tavern. It seemed like it had been an open space but too little remained to tell. What was left of the walls wasn't even as tall as he was, barring a chimney that threatened to crumble at any moment. Outside, what had once been a street was now a pit dug by monsters trying to drill into the bunker below.

Jason and Tera started wailing on each other with their weapons. Tera's serrated axes and gauntlet blades were brutal and flesh-tearing, while Jason's was refined and elegant. The sword had its powers suppressed, leaving the runes running down the black blade in their basic white. Even so, it remained a masterful weapon of near-limitless potential, forged by Gary with the assistance of his diamond-rank mentor. It was a sword whose construction was guided by the power of Jason's soul flowing through it, making for the ideal melding of wielder and weapon.

The duel had become simple and savage, painting both combatants in their own and each other's blood. Tera's twin axes were suited to this kind of fight and had torn ragged gashes in Jason's flesh. In their brutal stand-up fight, she had taken the early advantage because of her weapons, but she felt that start to shift. Her axes had taken a beating from Jason's sword, with heavy nicks and even losing some of the edge serrations.

As the fight was a marathon, rather than a sprint, she was forced to be less aggressive with her weapons. Jason's sword, on the other hand, was marred only by blood. Whether clashing blade to blade, slicing through her tough armour or missing and striking a wall, nothing left so much as a scratch on the blade. This allowed Jason to continue being as aggressive as he liked.

Even though she had to be mindful of her weapons, Tera continued the exchange of relentless attacks. She and Jason both grew more savage, striving to inflict damage faster than natural silver-rank healing could undo it. Like lumberjacks hand-sawing a tree, they fell into a rhythm of attack and counter-attack until they were both torn and ragged.

Tera's armour was all but ribbons, the skin beneath it not much better. Jason was, if anything, worse for not having armour in the first place. The love hearts on his boxer shorts were now invisible, the white cloth soaked entirely red.

An unspoken agreement formed between the pair: The one with the will to keep standing and take it the longest would be the one to survive. This was only a realisation for Jason, as Tera had known things would always come to this. Jason could see the manic glee in his opponent's expression as the duel reached this stage. It was her power that had put them here, after all, and this was the kind of fighting she knew.

For her part, Tera was surprised that Jason had lasted this long. His foolish early strategy was something she had seen before, and each time her enemy had crumbled on realising it would utterly fail. Every trickster she had fought lacked the resolve for this kind of fight. But not only did he engage fully in the ugly slugfest, but he was grinning like a snake after an egg rolled into its lair.

Tera was starting to feel an uncharacteristic sensation she realised, after a moment, was worry. It was only a tiny amount; this was her kind of fight and it was playing out just the way it should. Asano's tricky fighting had been annoying, but he finally realised that without a way to finish the job, all his fancy dancing meant nothing. The only way to win was to stand there and take more punishment than the enemy.

Tera loved her isolation power. It stripped away all the tricks and all the magic, leaving combat in its purest form. Victory wasn't about weapons or skill unless one person massively outclassed the other. It was about resolve. The ability to take the hits unflinchingly, not letting it affect hitting the enemy back.

This was why Tera chose not the weapons that inflicted the most harm but those that instilled the most fear. In every duel Tera had initiated with her power, the fight had come down to crudely hammering each other until her enemy lost their nerve. As the damage built up, they realised that to keep fighting it would only get worse and worse. That was

when the fear crept in. Then there was the pain. The mind could block out pain, she had learned, but the ragged wounds left by her serrated axes were ugly. They *looked* painful, which helped force the idea of pain into the mind.

Once fear and pain crept in, the fight was all but over. They would hesitate, just a little, not even realising they were doing it at first. But it was enough to sap their strength just a little, make them shrink back, just a little, and that was when she dominated. Every moment made it worse until they finally collapsed, often literally. More than a few opponents had knelt and waited as she took their heads, spirits broken.

But it had been too long. None of the signs were there. Asano was looking more like a market-stall meat skewer now, but he was coming at her harder than ever. His eyes sparkled with inhuman light from a face caked in blood. There was no fear of death, no grimacing through the pain.

What she saw was a man for whom fear and death and pain meant nothing. She had fought them her entire life, but this was someone who had walked beside them until they were boon companions. Looking into his eyes, Tera realised that the summoned creatures her kind had brought with them were not monsters. *This* was a monster.

With that revelation, the doubt, fear and hesitation finally arrived. But to her horror, they came from her, not him, her mind and body betraying her. They saw what she had brought out in this man and knew that he would never stop. She was somehow certain, against all sense and reason, that even killing him wouldn't do it. She might as well have duelled the sky, for all her axes could cut it down.

Tera refused to let fear rule her. After using her power so many times, she had found an opponent that would not fall in the kind of fight she had engineered, so she had to change it. She had to gamble on a decisive move before her growing fear left her paralysed.

Behind her opponent, a deep pit lay where there had once been a road. Monsters had dug it as they strove to breach the underground bunker, and were probably down there, digging still. It would be a tight space where long weapons would be useless and her gauntlet spikes would be the weapon of choice. Dropping her axes, she launched herself into a crash tackle.

Her wings lacked the magic to fly but one heavy beat from them was enough to throw her forward like a battering ram. Jason's sword went tumbling from his hand as they barrelled over the edge of the pit to plummet down. When they reached to bottom they crashed hard into a summoned monster.

The monster was a cube with an arm emerging from each side and an eye in the palm of each hand. Beams from those eyes had been drilling through a metal plate it had dug up when Tera and Asano landed on it hard. To Tera's surprise, the impact and their combined weight finished the job, breaching the bunker and dropping them all inside.