

## Chapter 781

### Death Knows How to Wait

“Two resurrections aren’t enough?” Jason asked the goddess. “Even as justification for doing something you must want to do anyway?”

“The purpose does not make the sacrifice cheaper,” Death told him. “The sacrifice is judged by what is given up. And what are resurrections to you, Jason Asano? You, who stand at the threshold of true immortality.”

“Oh,” he said as realisation struck. “I get it. If you help, we probably win and I turn into an astral king. Then I won’t need those resurrections, which means they aren’t any sacrifice at all.”

“They aren’t nothing. But aren’t enough.”

“What is?” he asked.

“Your path forward is one of power that goes beyond mortality, taking you outside of my authority. But if you commit to respecting my will, even as you move beyond my power, that has value.”

Jason narrowed his eyes as he met the gaze of the goddess.

“You don’t want a sacrifice,” he said. “You want to make some kind of bargain.”

“Pacts are how transcendents deal with one another.”

“I’m not transcendent yet. Could you please help me out with something so I can understand what we’re talking about here? No one has been completely explicit about what half-transcended means. My understanding is that once you max out diamond rank, reaching the maximal stage of mortal power, you’re then a half transcendent.”

“That is accurate.”

“So, if that half is the power requirement, is the other half some way to get you over the line? To cross the threshold of mortality?”

“That’s precisely what it is,” she confirmed. “Almost all half transcendents have reached the peak of mortal power and search for a means to move past the final limitation. Far less common are those like you, who obtain the other half before reaching the power threshold.”

“I haven’t obtained either half yet. And I won’t, without your help. If you won’t accept my sacrifice, why seek a pact with me? Someone who *maybe* has a chance at *potentially* getting halfway to the kind of person you make pacts with? It doesn’t sound like a reliable bet.”

“Immortality brings patience, Jason Asano. Death knows how to wait. I can gain a concession from you now that you would never accept in the future. The value in that is worth a miracle.”

“Obviously, I’m curious about what concession you’re looking for, but there’s something I have to ask first. When you said that ‘death knows how to wait,’ were you making a metaphor about the concept of death or were you talking in the third person? On an unrelated note, being in a conversation where that’s a genuine question is one of the coolest things that’s ever happened to me. And I’m an interdimensional ninja warlock, so epic moments are kind of my thing.”

Her only response was to look at him from under raised eyebrows.

“Oh, come on,” he said. “I know this is a very serious situation, and this whole thing is a tragedy for the brighthearts where we’re trying to salvage what little remains of their people. But some days you have to stop and recognise your life is awesome. I’m negotiating an immortality pact with the goddess of death so I can fight that undead army over there. And the reason I’m doing that is so my friend uses a wizard spell so I can fight over a magic tree inside a warped pocket of reality. This is a top-seven moment for me. Probably. Top-eight, definitely. I once found a taco that looked just like the British actor Brian Blessed. I mean, I think it did; I was pretty drunk.”

“I will lay out the concessions I am looking for,” she told him, ignoring everything else he said. “I will take your resurrections. Those you have, those you could ever have and those you could bestow upon others. You will agree that whatever your power, whatever your need, you will never bring anyone back from the dead.”

“I can accept that.”

“It is easy to agree to when you are less than thirty years old. What of when you are thirty thousand? You may come to chafe at the restriction.”

“Are you trying to talk me out of giving you what you want?”

“Pacts between immortals can outlast the lifespan of universes. My existence will be relatively short on that scale, but it will be long enough. There is no value in creating an antagonism that will last for millions of years, so a pact must be equitable. It is not a place for short-term thinking.”

“It may be short-term thinking, but I’ve learned that victory and defeat are decided in moments. The right gift in the right moment, however small, is worth more than anything the future has to offer. Where I come from, we say a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. I’m willing to risk recrimination from my future self.”

“So long as you are going into this with understanding, Jason Asano, there can be a compact between us.”

“If it is to be a pact then we need to define terms. Let’s start with what you want: no resurrecting people. I can accept that, but I need to know where the line is. Where does drastic emergency healing end and resurrection begin? My understanding is that even magic is blurry on that. Many high-rank healing abilities don’t differentiate between healing the near dead and restoring the dead.”

“You may use your power to arrest the condition of someone on the border of death, even beyond, if you can. You may keep them until you find someone else that can restore them, so long as you do not do so yourself.”

“So, as long as someone isn’t too far gone that they can’t be brought back with someone else’s resurrection magic, I can toss them in my soul space until I find someone who can use that magic? If I’m fast enough that their soul hasn’t done a runner, I assume.”

“Yes.”

“Acceptable. Which means we move onto my terms.”

“You will receive a miracle.”

“Not enough. You are asking for infinity and offer a moment.”

“The right gift in the right moment. Your words. You came to me looking for a miracle.”

“At the cost of a sacrifice that you refused. Then you offered a whole other deal. You’re the one who asked for a pact for me to enact your will forever. I’m okay with that because, to my surprise, some things really should be left to god. Or gods, as it turns out. Cloning dinosaurs never seems to work out, for example. Not that I’m saying gods should get into dinosaur cloning.”

Death gave him a sharp look, and Death’s sharp look was very sharp indeed.

“My point is,” Jason said, “I don’t mind what you’re asking for, but it’s something I’ll be giving you forever. Forever is a long time, even for you. Will you outlast this planet?”

“No. All things have their time, including this planet, its gods and the universe in which it resides. There is even an end for that which lies beyond reality, although such things are not yet for you to know.”

“Then, assuming this works out, I’ll still be knocking around, respecting your wishes about resurrection, long after you’re gone. You said that pacts should be equitable. Should not my benefits be just as eternal as yours?”

“I do not disagree in principle, but do not ask too much if you still want your miracle.”

“It occurs to me that if you’re asking me to carry out the will of death, then that’s exactly what I should do. If resurrection is anathema to me, shouldn’t undeath be as well?”

Death smiled.

“Indeed it should,” she said. “Your terms are acceptable.”

“We should probably go into specifics.”

“You will be satisfied, I give you my word. Are you willing to trust my word, Jason Asano?”

He looked at her for a long, silent moment before nodding.

“I will,” he said.

“I would like to point out that I could have offered you only the miracle you need here and nothing else. And I could have asked far more than what I have in return and you would have accepted.”

“I would,” Jason admitted. “Is that what you’re doing?”

“No. But I think my fellow deities would appreciate you gaining an understanding of divine benevolence.”

Jason nodded.

“I do understand. I’ve never denied being a fool, but I’m not a blind fool. I can’t deny all the gods have done for me at this point.”

“Then perhaps you would have the decency to demonstrate more respect in the future.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said. “I’m self-aware enough to realise that my biases have affected the way I relate to you all. Dominion is still kind of a dick, though.”

Death gave him a flat look.

“Right, respect. Sorry about that. Personal growth is an ongoing process. Can we move on to the miracle now, please?”

“I must warn you, Jason Asano, that my miracle will not hand you victory. It will give you only a chance that you and your allies must seize with your own hands.”

“We don’t need you to fight our fight for us. We need a god who helps those who help themselves.”

“Then the terms of our pact are set.”

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### Death Pact: The Sanctity of Death

- If you accept the death pact, any ability to resurrect yourself or another will be sealed. This pact will persist through any changes in nature or power that you undergo.

- The power of undeath will be suppressed by your aura. Existing undead will not be impaired but undeath will not animate and undeath energy will be purged from the ambient magic.
  - The pact will be enacted by the Pallimustus goddess of death guiding your soul to make changes to itself. The deity will not gain access to your soul. Any attempt at instigating changes outside the agreed-upon conditions will be rejected by your soul.
  - As an external condition of this pact, the Pallimustus goddess of death shall enact a miracle.
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Death held out her hand and Jason did the same, pressing their palms together. He felt the immensity of her power, his own a droplet of water next to an ocean that spanned out forever. That power resonated with his soul, not an attack but a guide, showing him a path to reshape himself.

Jason was well-versed in the offensive methods of soul interaction. His first and most drastic lesson had been from the Builder but he had developed those powers for himself, then alongside Amos Pensinata. This was doing the same thing but within an entirely different paradigm, not aggressive but benevolent. Jason watched with his spiritual senses as a new branch of spiritual manipulation was opened up before him.

Concentrating became harder as his soul reshaped itself. It was a relatively small and entirely innocuous change, but it was still his soul reshaping itself. As the process drew to a close, Jason felt the goddess calling out to the power he had taken from all the messengers he had drained. He drew on that power and delivered it to her, as per their agreement. It flowed out of his soul and into her, and then her power withdrew.

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- You have accepted a pact with the Pallimustus goddess of death.
- You have accepted the cycle of natural death as an intrinsic element of your soul.

#### New Title: Keeper of the Cycle

- You may not resurrect yourself or others. This is a change self-applied to your own soul and may not be undone. This effect will carry through any transformation of body or soul. This condition is part of a compact. Should you circumvent this condition, all other aspects of the pact will be negated and you will suffer severe spiritual backlash.
- You have become an exclusion zone for undeath energy. Undeath energy cannot exist in the ambient mana of your soul realm, spirit domains or the area within your aura. Undeath energy of significantly higher rank than your power may fully or partly overcome this exclusion.
- Power bestowed to the undead, such as through divine power, is negated. This has a greater or lesser effect depending on the relative strength of you and the power in question.
- Suppressing the aura of an undead will impede the abilities of that undead. Undead able to partially or fully resist your aura suppression will resist this effect to an

equivalent degree. Undead weaker than you may have their animating force negated, depending on the nature of the magic animating them.

- Abilities that apply afflictions also apply ghost fire. Abilities that drain mana will degrade the animating force of the undead. Those with a direct connection to your soul will have their abilities enhanced in the same way if they are in relative proximity to you.
  - While your aura is actively suppressing the undead, allies within your aura are affected by ghost fire.
  - [Ghost Fire] (affliction, damage-over-time, magic): Ghost fire is harmless to the living, calming the mind and shielding them from the effects of undead auras and ambient magic infused with undeath energy. Ghost fire is extremely harmful to the undead, degrading their animating force and inflicting ongoing transcendent damage.
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Death vanished but Jason barely noticed as he fell to his knees, his soul roiling. He struggled to restrain his unstable aura, contain it as best he could. His insides felt like they were passing through a blender. The gold-rankers noticed his disrupted aura and Miriam pulled Emir from the fighting to go check on him.

“Jason, what’s happening?” Emir asked as he reached Jason. Jason was on his hands and knees, leaning forward as if expecting to throw up.

“Had a chat with the goddess of death,” Jason said, his voice strained through gritted teeth. “I’m okay.”

“Goddess of death?” Emir asked, looking around. “Are you sure? Death was a god, last I checked, not a goddess.”

“I think the gods just pick whatever gender they like on the day. Some of them, at least. You didn’t know that?”

“I’ve never been especially religious. They just switch it up? I know someone like that. They’re still waiting for you to talk to them about your cloud house, by the way. You’re making a diamond-ranker very cranky, which is never a great idea.”

“Mate, on the seating chart of problems I have to deal with, a cranky diamond-ranker is at the kids table. Why are you here?”

“I was sent to check if you were okay.”

Jason turned from where he’d been staring at the ground to give Emir a pointed look.

“So, uh, are you okay?”

“I’ve been worse.”

“That’s what I figured. I checked in with your team healer over voice chat while I was coming over. Neil said you were probably twisting yourself inside out so you could pull some ridiculous power out of your rear end.”

“Something like that. I don’t suppose you’ve noticed a miracle going off?”