

## Chapter 911

### A Matter of Mindset

As the ship approached Greenstone's artificial island, Jason and his companions were gathering in a space not unlike a hotel lobby. Aspects of the vessel were similar to a cruise ship, although heavier on amenity and utility spaces and lighter on accommodation. Even Emir only travelled around with fifty or so staff, and Jason had far fewer people on board than that.

Jason was walking towards the lobby with Sophie and Humphrey as Sophie voiced her unhappiness with the destination. She hadn't joined Belinda in their early visit to their hometown, and she wasn't keen on going now.

"I don't see why we're even here," she said. "What does this place have to offer us anymore? And I know you don't like all this pageantry, Jason."

"You've always liked your ostentation spontaneous," Humphrey pointed out. "Having it scheduled and organised doesn't seem like you."

"It's not for me," Jason said. "Or for you, Humphrey. A special event doesn't seem special to you because you're the prince of this town. It may have a Duke, but everyone knows that the Gellers are the real power here. You were born for bigger things than this town has to offer, so a triumphant return visit doesn't mean much."

"Then what is all this for?" Humphrey asked.

"Every aristocratic house in Greenstone will be represented in the crowd waiting for us. Not just some pointless nephew, either. Elders, heads of house. Organisations, too. Directors of the Magic Society, the Adventure Society, the Alchemy association. There are as many of Greenstone's silver rankers gathered here as have ever come together in one place before."

"What do you care about the nobility of some low-magic backwater?" Sophie asked, not hesitating to talk down about her hometown. "You socialise with gods and kings and diamond rankers."

"I told you, it's not about me. Right now, all those people are gathered at the Adventure Society's VIP dock. And who are they waiting for? It's not me. People haven't been talking about me for years, and I was only famous amongst Adventure Society insiders. These people are gathering for Team Biscuit. Adventuring legends and hometown heroes. For you, Humphrey, that's not a big deal. Everyone expected big things of you. But think about all those people, and who else they're here to see."

He glanced at Sophie.

“People know your story, Sophie. They’ve doubtless mythologised it well outside anything that’s actually true, but that’s not what matters. What matters is that a pair of girls from Old City became famous adventurers. And now they’re coming home, celebrated by the city’s elite.”

“I never wanted to be a role model.”

“Too bad. And it’s not just for the next little Sophie and Belinda, either. Neil’s family have been stuck as what amounts to servants to the Mercer’s for years, but now the most powerful people in the city have to show them respect. Today they get to stand tall as Neil comes home, probably dressed in his aunt’s awful clothes. And you know who else is waiting for us? A clan of eel farmers. The important people of this city would cross the road to avoid them, but today, those eel farmers will be front and centre, waiting for their boy to come home. And those important people are stuck standing behind them.”

“Does it always have to be a speech with you?” Sophie asked. “You could have just said it will be nice for Neil and Clive’s families to see.”

“That seems a little reductive.”

“I think you just like hearing yourself talk.”

“What are you talking about? Everyone loves hearing me talk.”

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The Adventure Society VIP dock was on the ocean side of Greenstone’s artificial island. The expectation was that if your vessel needed a sheltered harbour, you weren’t important enough to use it. Near the dock was a large building normally used for social events, as the dock itself spent most of its time empty. This also allowed the attending luminaries to save face. They could tell themselves they were attending a social function, not standing around, waiting for more important people than them to arrive.

The building had been restructured just a couple of years ago, and most of its three stories were glass walls. Elspeth Arella looked out at the ocean from the third floor, radiating a lack of desire for company. Most of the attendees were looking to ingratiate themselves with the Geller boy and his famous team. Jason Asano was a name that hadn’t entered their minds in years, and it seemed only Elspeth herself was focused on him. If they were all very lucky, that wouldn’t change.

She had been expecting to sense the ship before she saw it, but was proven wrong as it crested the horizon. Even as it drew closer, revealing how large it was, she sensed nothing, even staring right at it. She knew that most of the attendees would not notice, let alone understand the significance. They were socialites and merchant barons, not warriors and soldiers. The Messenger War had left Greenstone largely untouched.

That vessel was a message about power and who held it, and it was not one that the Director of the Adventure Society missed. She also knew that it was not accidental; Danielle Geller was on that ship. She did not send unintended signals, and she did not like Elspeth.

As the ship neared the shore, the collective group went outside. She glanced around, watching the crowd with her aura senses as well as her eyes. She'd put reliable people in key positions, hoping to keep volatile elements under control, but the potential for disaster was very real. One moment, a lord's idiot son might be mocking the clan of eel farmers, unhappy they were given pride of place. The idiot would be hurtling out to sea at the hands of a gold ranker in about three seconds and things would only devolve from there. Elspeth's spectrum for the success of the event ranged from a brawl to a massacre.

The massive vessel pulled up at the dock, larger than the building in which people had been waiting for it. Elspeth couldn't help but remember the similar scene of Emir Bahadir's arrival. This ship was different, in that the cloud material of the vessel was only visible in sections between large panels that covered it.

Elspeth wondered if the different ship signalled a different outcome. Emir Bahadir wasn't easy to handle, but the treasure hunter knew how to navigate the locals on a visit like this. Jason Asano was smooth as sandpaper, always rubbing people wrong. During his time in Greenstone, he'd somehow befriended every person who was powerful and independent enough to make Elspeth's job hard, and annoyed everyone else.

Clouds wafted from the ship to create a wide bridge, and a gap opened in the side of the ship. The Gellers emerged, Danielle and her son who was becoming as famous as she was. Next to the Geller boy was a man who looked similar enough to be a younger brother, but with silver hair and eyes.

It was only after Humphrey Geller left Greenstone that Elspeth discovered that he'd been wandering around with an actual gods-bedamned dragon the whole time. She'd known he had a shapeshifting familiar, of course, but an actual, true blood dragon? His mother had told her it was a lyre drake, but Elspeth should have known better than to trust Danielle Geller.

She catalogued the rest as they came over the bridge. The thieves she'd once tasked her society branch to hunt down, not knowing the chaos that would ensue. Asano, the main perpetrator of that chaos. The Magic Research Association's archchancellor. The uncultured cheering that arose from the grubby-looking farmers at the appearance of the refined man of magic was a strange incongruity.

Elsbeth's gaze moved back to Asano. He caught her gaze for a moment before looking away, chatting amiably with the Devone boy. Then she felt a strange shimmer of aura around her and the sounds around her deafened. Asano's voice came out of nowhere.

"It's not me you have to worry about, director. I'm not the one you tried to sell to Lucian Lamprey as a means to slake his deprived appetites. But you don't really have to worry about Sophie, either, because she's dedicated herself to being a good person. She has this friend, though. You might want to check under your bed for alchemical bombs until we're gone again."

Elsbeth was at the front of the line for meet and greets. Asano was polite, as if meeting a passing acquaintance after a long time.

"I'd like the chance for you and I to talk, Mr Asano. Adventurer business."

"Of course, director."

What came next was a lengthy and tedious sequence of introductions and reintroductions, carefully orchestrated in order and length. After her experiences with Asano in the past, she was amazed that it all went to plan. There was none of his signature disruption or anti-authoritarian antics. It seemed that he had learned some diplomacy in the last couple of decades. As for who had managed to wrangle the lunatic, she noticed Danielle Geller throwing glances his way.

By the time it was all over, the one thing Elspeth least expected to happen had taken place: everything had gone to plan. No aristocratic feuds flaring up. No spoiled rich kids had made trouble out of arrogance and pride. Asano hadn't decided to take umbrage with anyone and start throwing people into the ocean now he was gold rank and no one could stop him.

As she made her way back to her office, she felt a strange relief, even as a new worry plagued at her mind. She would need to look closer into those former thieves, and she had just the person to ask. On reaching her office, she changed into a hooded outfit that would not look out of place in the Old City, then headed out to see her father.

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Adris Dorgan was a happy man. Once a powerful crime lord, he found that legitimacy sat very well with him. As mayor of Old City, he'd dragged it kicking and screaming from the old days into a new era. Aristocratic families, as it turned out, were far more criminal than the old crime families, and with none of the sense of code or community. Now that Adris could shield the people from at least some of that, Old City was becoming a better place for its people.

His daughter was less happy. She had wanted to leave the city and rise through the ranks of the Adventure Society, and that had all come to nothing. Once, that had angered him, but those days were long gone. Greenstone was quiet, far from the Messenger War. The days of the Builder cult and the strange monster surges were almost two decades gone, and Greenstone was safe. Having his daughter safe and close were treasures to a father.

Walking through his library, he stopped dead. His mind flashed back to an encounter twenty years ago, where he found a young man staring at a picture in the library of his old home. The library was different, but it was the same man doing the same thing now, having once again ignored his security. Adris moved to where the man was staring at the painting.

“A long time ago,” Asano said, not looking from the painting “you offered to help me get my hands of a work or two by Moher. Said he was a family friend.”

“He still is.”

“I might take you up on that, if the offer is still open.”

“I suppose that depends on what your intentions are otherwise.”

“I gave your daughter a little prod and she’ll be coming to see you. I thought it might be a good idea for her and I to have a little chat.”

“I once warned you about interfering in my daughter’s affairs, Asano. I don’t care if you’re some all-powerful gold ranker, and I’m just a politician who got to silver with cores. If you do anything to her, I’ll find a way to kill you.”

Asano finally turned from the painting to flash a smile.

“I like you, Mr Dorgan. Family is important. Nothing will happen to your daughter from my people, even if she does have it coming. That’s not what we’re here for. I’d like to clear the air, now the power dynamic has shifted since my last stay in Greenstone. Also, there’s something she wants to discuss with me, and I thought it might be awkward in a room where she once dangled me in the air by the throat.”

“And you’re sure she’s coming here?”

“She’s crossing the bridge to Old City now.”

“You’re having her watched?”

“No, I’m just tracking her with my aura senses.”

“How do you extend your perception that far without washing the city in your aura?”

“Practise.”

“Well, can I offer you a cup of tea while we wait?”

“That would be lovely, thank you.”

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Jason sat across from Elspeth in one of her father's entertaining courtyards. It had enclosed walls covered in plants growing out of alcoves, and was open to the sky. The furniture was ornate wrought metal, with plush padding. A tea set occupied most of the table between them, complete with scones with gemberry jam and huge dollops of whipped cream. Jason paid more attention to those than he did the Adventure Society director.

"What can I do for you?" he asked as he dabbed at the cream around his mouth with a napkin.

"How familiar are you with Boko, Mr Asano?"

"A city to the north of here. A lot older than Greenstone, with a population native to the area. If I recall correctly, most of Greenstone's people are descended from the original Estercost immigrants, I think, only a few centuries ago. Boko is a city of academics, if I recall correctly."

"Scholars of the arts. Painting, poetry, sculpture, dance. People travel from across the continent and beyond to visit their theatres."

"I only passed through briefly. A portal stop, in the aftermath of that disastrous expedition. It's pretty, as I recall. Lots of gardens."

"Do you happen to recall a group of raiders that came south during your time here?"

"I do. I was part of the group that dealt with them. They were rural tribesfolk, weren't they? From the areas around Boko?"

"That's what we thought at the time. As it turns out, their origins were in Boko proper. It began as some kind of anti-intellectual movement amongst low rankers and escalated from there. Moved out of the city and into areas where education was less of a priority. There, it festered like a sore. Getting back to primal manhood, that kind of thing. It thrives on low-rank, disenfranchised young men."

"I'm familiar with the basic idea."

"We had thought this particular movement had died out, but there has been a resurgence in the last few years."

"Why bring this to me? Isn't this a low-rank problem?"

"It's not your rank that makes me want you involved. I've been keeping an eye on this alongside my counterpart in Boko. Our initial belief was that this was a naturally arising, decentralised movement. It probably was, in the beginning, but we're starting to suspect some manner of organisational force behind it. Whether they were there at the beginning, or co-opted an emerging cultural phenomenon, we believe they are using it building a

powerful political block, the arms of which don't even realise they are heads of the same hydra. They keep their hands hidden, using populist groups as their face. Now it controls large portions of the rural areas around Greenstone, Boko and the Veldt. If we tried to reach out and quash it, we'd have towns and villages across half the continent in borderline rebellion."

"Do you have any sense of their objective?"

"Industry, to start. The production of spirit coins and our signature green stone is a lot of money, when taken as a whole."

"You think someone is looking to control small local governments? Extort shady tariffs on everyone operating in the region?"

"Something like that. If money is their end goal, we live with some graft. It's not like the aristocrats are any better. Our concern is if they have a larger and more sinister agenda. Moving their power base into Greenstone and Boko, maybe. Or quietly supporting more traditional problem groups in other regions. Illegal magical research requires funding, after all, just like the legitimate research. Whatever the ultimate purpose, it's an ongoing concern."

"So, why not go in and clear them out?"

"We haven't seen an approach like this before. It's a matter of mindset. On this world, we always think top-down first. Rank hierarchy, which is why you get to come into my city and make a giant mess. The golds do what they like, the silvers run most of it and the bronze rankers do what they're told."

"I never had much time for that."

"Oh, I remember. This operation, movement, whatever it is, they think differently too. Bottom up. People barely think about the iron-rankers and the normal. Even in a low-magic zone like Greenstone they don't hold a lot of influence. This movement takes the people our way of thinking ignores and melds them into a power built not on magical strength but ideological indoctrination. Taking disenfranchisement and isolation and turning it into a sense of belonging, welded to cultural concepts that make them easy to manipulate."

"You're saying that whoever is behind this isn't operating like someone from your world."

"Back when you were living here in Greenstone, even I kept hearing about your endless pontificating about how our society was all wrong. People were dodging you in the admin building so they didn't have to listen to it. And I remembered my horror at hearing that more of your kind had arrived. That was two monster surges ago, and I never heard anything else about it. But when we heard you were coming back, Vincent Trenslow

remembered enough of what you would talk about then to put things together. Power derived from large groups of the weak.”

“That’s not how I put it.”

“But I think Vincent was right. He suggested that whoever is behind all this might come, not from our world, but from yours.”

## Chapter 912

### Posturing Children

“Let’s assume,” Jason told Elspeth, “that someone from Earth is pulling the strings. There were a bunch of them in Estercost and I left them twisting in the wind for years. It only makes sense that they’ve gone out and started doing things. But, even assuming that someone from Earth is your problem, my being from Earth too doesn’t solve it.”

He sighed, then sipped at his tea appreciatively.

“You know, Greenstone really does have the best tea I’ve had in Pallimustus.”

“We’re not here to talk about tea.”

“That’s a shame,” he said, and set his teacup down with a regretful glance. “I was enjoying making purely social calls lately.”

“Asano…”

He groaned.

“Director, let’s take a look at your situation. The Ustei tribesmen who came south during my time here in Greenstone predate the arrival of more people from Earth by what? Three years, give or take? Assuming that there is someone manipulating this movement of yours, and further assuming that they’re from Earth, this means that they inserted themselves into an existing situation.”

“The violent ones aren’t the issue. Those we can just deal with. It’s the groups that are building up, growing their influence amongst the population, but not taking any violent action. They’re digging into the small rural communities. Influencing the populace and putting their own people into positions of local authority.”

“And that’s your real problem. Hidden powers moving in secret to manipulate one or more grassroots movements. The movements themselves aren’t aware that they are slowly but surely being twisted to serve the very forces they believe they stand against. This happens in my world across the political spectrum.”

“What do we do about it?”

“I don’t know.”

“How do they deal with this issue on Earth?”

“Most with sensationalist journalism and calling each other Hitler on the internet.”

“What?”

“We don’t, Director, and that’s your problem. If we knew how to stop it, we would.”

“You’re saying you can’t help.”

“No, I’m not. Your hidden influencers, we can probably deal with. My group includes some people who excel at infiltration and information gathering. They can probably root out your masterminds, and then I’ll deal with it, if they are from Earth. If not, we’ll leave them to you. That will stop whatever agenda they have, but that doesn’t solve your larger issue.”

“Which is?”

“Whoever you’re after didn’t invent these groups. They came in and made use of what was already there. You delete the person behind the scenes, the groups themselves won’t even notice. They’re going to keep winning hearts and minds in all these small towns and villages. The places where people with power and money only visit if they absolutely have to. Those groups rose up for a reason. You’re going to be dealing with them until the reasons they formed in the first place get addressed.”

“I have no problem with these groups existing. That’s for the Dukes to deal with. My concern is someone using this movement to fund things the Adventure Society has to deal with. Red Table cultists, restricted essence research, messenger collaboration. Things that get a lot harder to stamp out if we don’t catch them early.”

“That’s all well and good, Director, but whoever is manipulating these people is an opportunist. We can get rid of them, fine, but if the opportunity is still there, you’re just going to get someone else moving in. This is a very Earth-style operation they’re running, but there’s no reason someone from this world can’t do it. Especially now that someone has demonstrated how.”

“I’m not responsible for unhappy low rankers.”

“Then don’t do anything. Spend the rest of your career cleaning out maggots because you refuse to remove the rot.”

“What exactly are you suggesting?”

“Oh, I’ve got my own political mess to walk into, back on Earth. You can sort this one out. But, maybe try asking these people what they want, instead of telling them they don’t matter and to shut up.”

“That’s not what we’re doing.”

“Yes, it is. You think these people don’t have power because they can’t throw lightning or breathe fire. They can’t rise up in violence, but they can down tools in protest. What happens if all the quarry workers and spirit coin farmers stop working?”

“The families who own the quarries and farms get more workers.”

“Oh, come on, Elspeth. You’re too smart not to see where that road goes, long term. It just keeps getting worse, and how long can Greenstone’s export economy survive like

that? Once supply interruptions become a regular thing, trade partners start looking for more reliable alternatives.”

“Still not my problem.”

“Then stand by and watch the city die. I’ll be long gone.”

Elsbeth scowled, picked up a scone and shoved it in her mouth, chewing angrily.

“Elsbeth, I’m not trying to tell you how to approach social change. I’ve figured out that I’m really bad at it. But maybe try to convince the Duke to sit down with some of these people. Find out what they want and maybe even think about giving it to them. It’s probably not that much.”

Elsbeth finished her scone, looking slightly embarrassed as she wiped the cream from around her mouth.

“You missed a bit on your chin,” Jason said. “No, the other side. Yeah, that’s it.”

She put down her napkin and sighed.

“So,” she said. “That was the famous Jason Asano ‘change everything about your society’ speech, was it?”

“I suppose it was. Look, I did one semester of political science before dropping out over a girl, so my expertise is limited.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“It means that I once learned just enough to be wrong about a lot of things. But sometimes, when you have power, you have to deal with those things anyway. Despite your insistence that this is the Duke’s problem, I think you know that.”

“I do,” Elsbeth conceded.

“I have my own mess that I’ll be walking into on Earth. I’m trying to find people who can help me not make a giant mess of things.”

“Geller?”

“Amongst others, hopefully. I think you would be a good fit, but while you have the political acumen, I wouldn’t trust you to make moral choices. I’ve done terrible things, out of anger, frustration or ignorance, but I’ve always regretted them. You do them out of cold calculation.”

“This is about the Wexler girl.”

“You don’t sell people to twisted deviants, Director, however much doing so might advantage you.”

“Not all of us get to waltz through life with gods and high rankers giving us special treatment, Asano. Some of us have to fight and scrape for every little thing we get. Not everyone gets to walk the easy road and have things just handed to them.”

Jason smiled.

“Do you remember, back when I was iron rank, and I didn’t give much of a care for what rank difference meant you could say to someone?”

“How could I forget?”

“You should be very grateful that, for all that I have changed since then, that has remained the same.”

He stood up.

“I’ll find your masterminds, Director. If they’re from Earth, I’ll deal with them myself.”

“You said that before. You should hand them over to the Adventure Society.”

“I tried that once, Director. You sold them to a pervert.”

“And your hands are clean, are they? I remember someone who murdered five Adventure Society members, not that far from where we’re sitting.”

“My hands are filthy, Director. But at least I try.”

“So? It’s results that matter, Asano. Trying doesn’t matter a damn.”

He sighed.

“I don’t think anything productive will come from us continuing this conversation.”

“Agreed. Are you still willing to loan me those infiltration and information experts you mentioned? The only ones we field here in Greenstone belong to the aristocratic families, and are deployed against each other. They aren’t up to something on this level. I checked.”

“I set them to work about ten minutes ago.”

“While we were talking?”

“You aren’t worth my undivided attention, Director.”

She also stood up.

“I’m going to regret you coming back to my city, aren’t I?”

“You don’t already?”

“I suppose I do.”

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Li Li Mei loved Boko. It was a beautiful city, filled with gorgeous architecture and wondrous gardens. She was going to miss it. Someone was looking for her, and had gotten far too close before she noticed. Despite the go-betweens, cut-outs and false identities, someone was zeroing in on her. For weeks they’d been digging their way through her layers of protection, and she only noticed now through sheer luck. Whoever it was, they were extremely good at what they did.

Her decision to abandon the entire undertaking was immediate and without hesitation. She was leaving behind a lucrative operation, but she'd sent enough money away that it hadn't been wasted time. Gold rank cores were wildly expensive, but at least they could be had for money. On Earth, they were the rarest and most valuable commodity, perhaps other than reality cores.

The only thing she stopped to grab was a go-bag she had stashed for this exact eventuality. She took it and descended the tower she owned, not by the elevating platform but by the stairs. A secret door led into a basement that no one but a long-dead stone-shaper knew about. From there, a long tunnel led into the sewers. The sewer tunnels were massive, reminding her of a video game more than the actual sewers of Earth. There were sinister types to be found down here, but she let out just enough silver-rank aura to warn them off.

Li Mei had learned the importance of good aura control over the last decade and a half. She'd known that Jason Asano had far superior aura control to anyone else on Earth, but she hadn't realised how bad they all were until she arrived in Pallimustus. Looking back, it was no wonder he treated Earth's magical factions like posturing children.

She absently wondered what had happened to the man. The Earth refugees had all been cooped up at the Geller compound in Cyrion waiting for him. Then they were told that he wasn't coming. The stories as to what had happened were unclear, but many of the Earthlings believed him dead. Li Mei did not share that opinion.

She took to the streets further from her storehouse than she would like. It was close to one of the city gates, and had no ties to her on paper. It would be found eventually, she was certain, but she intended to be long gone by then. A well-dressed Chinese woman walking through one of the seedier sections of a city full of black people would be easy for her pursuers to find out about. Hopefully, she would be well away before that happened.

The storehouse had a large, fully loaded camping skimmer. It had amenities and supplies that would let her lay low on the inner reaches of the continent until she made her way to other parts of the world. She didn't trust hiring a portal specialist, and while ships were also a risk, it was one she could ameliorate. She wouldn't use her own shipping contacts, but she had a list of dockmasters who would reliably stay bribed and direct her to a captain to discreetly sail her out.

She breathed a sigh of relief as she reached the storehouse. She slipped down an alley beside it and carefully swept her sense through the building. Sensing nothing but the skimmer and its supplies, she used a very expensive crystal to unlock the reinforced door. She opened it and duck inside, using the crystal to lock it again.

“Yeah, that’s her.”

Li Mei froze. She slowly turned to find three people looking at her, including two women she didn’t recognise. The man looked different, and it had been more than fifteen years, but she recognised him immediately.

“G’day, Miss Li. It’s been a while.”

## Chapter 912

### This Is Not a Cliff

Li Li Mei was rooted to the ground as if a landscaper had planted her there. Her body was rigid, her face locked on the man in front of her. Jason looked more relaxed, but the rigidity of his casual posture told a different story.

“You know this lady?” Belinda asked.

“I do,” he said.

“Does your planet only have seven people on it?” Estella asked. “Why do you know them all?”

“I vaguely recall Taika mentioning that I knew more people amongst the Earth refugees. And that they didn’t join him and Travis because they didn’t want to be sent to me.”

“And they bet on the kindness of strangers over getting help from you?” Estella asked. “How bad is your reputation where you come from?”

“It’s not great,” Jason admitted.

“I can tell by the way she’s looking at you,” Belinda said. “That’s the way sandwiches look at Neil.”

Li Mei remained frozen as Jason wandered closer. He was not a tall man, and stood eye to eye with her.

“Hello, Miss Li. How have you been?”

She finally found her voice.

“You really are alive then?”

“On and off. The people from Earth think I’m dead?”

“Some. I didn’t believe it.”

“Why not?”

“We thought you were crazy, back on Earth. Running around, treating governments and magic factions like they were inconsequential as you did... whatever it was you were doing. You never explained it properly.”

“No one was willing to listen. All any of you heard was the word ‘power’ running through your heads in a loop.”

“It was a time of unprecedented opportunity, or so we thought. Only after I spent time in this world did I realise that we were dogs, fighting over scraps. You were doing things like they do them in this world, because you thrive here. You fit.”

“No, he doesn’t,” Belinda called out. “He’s weird everywhere he goes.”

"It's kind of nice knowing that it's not just here," Estella said.

"It does feel like a vindication of all the things we say about him behind his back."

Jason turned to look at them from under raised eyebrows.

"Do you two mind?"

"No, we're good," Belinda said.

"She's very pretty," Estella observed, drawing an exaggerated look of exasperation from Belinda.

"You are such a skirt chaser. I cannot take you anywhere."

"All I said was that she's pretty."

"I'm standing right here and you're eyeing off other women, right in front of me."

Jason shook his head and turned back to Li Mei.

"Come on," he told her. "We're taking a walk."

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Li Mei's storage building was in one of Boko's less reputable areas, a warehouse district far from the gardens and universities.

"The gold rankers in Greenstone," she said. "That was you, obviously."

"Yes," Jason confirmed.

"I heard it was some famous team out of Vitesse."

"My team. I just haven't been on it for a while."

"I never liked following adventurer news. Clearly, I should have been more diligent."

As a foreigner and a small woman moving alone, she'd constantly caught looks as she made her way through the streets, fending off unwanted attention with her aura. Moving through those same streets with Asano was a completely different experience.

"What's going on?" she asked him.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"We're very obvious outsiders here, but people are stepping around us without so much as a glance. It's almost like they're pretending they don't see us."

"They're subconsciously not paying us any attention. If we do something too unusual, they'll notice. And a small number of people respond with aggression and anger instead of getting lulled in."

"You're doing this?"

"It's become a habit. I try to avoid attention when I can, these days. I can stop it, if you like."

"How? Some kind of mind control?"

“I don’t think magic can do that, at least not directly. The soul barrier shields the mind, so you have to use workarounds. Physiologically manipulating the brain, that kind of thing. The goddess of knowledge can’t read minds, but she has access to all knowledge, so she effectively can.”

“Then how?”

“Aura manipulation. I can’t alter their auras, but I can modulate mine to something that most people will instinctively and subconsciously overlook. It’s like how you never look at your habitual surroundings unless something changes and makes it stand out. I’m giving off ‘that chair in the corner you never sit in’ vibes.”

“And you’re doing it for both of us.”

“I first started working on this back on Earth, based on some vampire tricks. I’ve had a lot of practise and training with my aura since then.”

“Now that I’ve seen this world, I can only wonder how much you could have offered us back on Earth. If we’d treated you like a visiting dignitary instead of a commodity to be divided up.”

“My knowledge was limited. Farrah was the one you should have gone after.”

“No offence, Mr Asano, but you were a lot easier to manipulate. She knew to shut up and walk away when she didn’t know something.”

He let out a chuckle.

“You have more knowledge now,” she said. “As do I. You were here for what? A year and a half before going back? I’ve been here ten times that. The things I could do on Earth now. I could change the world.”

“It’s been a long time, Miss Li. The world changed on its own.”

“You have contact with Earth?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“We’re not here for me to answer your questions, Miss Li. We’re here to decide what happens to you now.”

“I didn’t do anything illegal.”

“Pallimustus takes more of a ‘spirit of the law’ approach than Earth does. Which you know, or we wouldn’t have caught you running.”

“And you’ve been given discretionary power over me.”

“If someone had to give it to you, it’s not real power. Especially not in this world. You’ve been left to my discretion because I took that authority, and because no one with

the power to challenge me will do so. Not over you. Which is why I am assuming you chose this low magic zone for your little scheme.”

“It wasn’t that little.”

“A matter of perspective, I suppose.”

“You were like this on Earth, too. Acting as if our concerns were too small for you to bother with on anything but a whim.”

“They were.”

“I realised that, after coming here. But now we’re here, and you’re still acting more important than everyone else.”

“It’s not me that’s important. I have responsibilities.”

“Saving the world again? In an unexplained way, from an indeterminate threat, but trust you, it’s really important?”

“Stop that. You know I like banter, so you’re trying to engage me. Make me like you.”

“Is it working?”

“I’ve had better,” he said, but a smile teased the corners of his mouth. “I’m not going to kill you, Miss Li, or hand you over to the local authorities. As much as I do like the directness of how things are done here, the more discretionary the power, the greater the chance for corruption. This place can be barbaric, and the only check on that is the moral compass of whoever has the power.”

“No world is perfect, I suppose.”

“No. Same for the people in them, even those of us who get to travel to both.”

Their meandering path led out of the warehouse district and into a nicer area, close to a small university campus. The buildings were a mix of sandstone blocks and the region’s signature green brick. There were tall, thin trees, similar to palms. Leafy green plants grew out of pots and alcoves, or dangled from balconies. Water features were prominent, from channels that fed the abundant plant life to fountains placed at road junctions as roundabouts.

“They call this the Oasis City,” Li Mei said. “There are multiple apertures to the water astral space here. Apparently, some cult tried to sabotage them years ago, but they are well guarded, here. The cult had more luck out in the desert, so I’ve heard.”

“They did.”

“You were involved?”

“Peripherally. I was still in training when the big battle took place in the water astral space itself, so I missed out. Which was good, because a lot of people more powerful than me died, including my friend Farrah.”

“This is a different Farrah from the one with you on Earth?”

“No. I died too, later, fighting the being that cult worships. When I came back to life on Earth, some cosmic entities decided that she should as well. They thought there should be at least one person I can trust there.”

“There were a lot of reports, back on Earth. Interviews with people who encountered you. You used to talk off-the-cuff about things so outlandish that we would dismiss them as nonsense. Like coming back from the dead. Now, I realise that at least some of them were true. I’m more credulous than I was, but cosmic beings bringing people back from the dead is a lot, even for this world.”

“Go ask the goddess of death. Her church gave me a certificate to say how many times I’ve died.”

“Isn’t the death god a man?”

“Gods like to keep things flexible in that regard.”

“You say that like you know a lot of gods.”

“How much of this is you pretending not to have exhaustively researched everything you could about me after getting to Pallimustus?”

“I don’t—”

“Your aura reveals your emotions to me, Miss Li. You are doing a remarkable job of hiding your fear, by the way. I used to do that, but I lost the knack. It’s healthier to work through the emotions than bottle them up, believe me.”

“I saw you murder people on television with your mind, Mr Asano. I believe you.”

“Good. Now, enough about me. Tell me about this operation of yours. The local authorities are worried that you’re quietly fundraising an undead army or something.”

“Why would I do that?”

“They don’t know you. They have no idea what you would and wouldn’t do, and the worst-case scenario is always bad on this world. It wasn’t that far from here that a blood cult was trying to summon a world eating leech monster.”

“Don’t you summon a leech monster?”

“He’s a good boy,” he said defensively. “Anyway, the point is that they don’t know what you want because they don’t know you. You were careful about that part.”

“Not careful enough.”

“You were doing quite well, until gold rankers came along. In this part of the world, that’s bringing a bazooka to a knife fight. Belinda and Estella have decades of experience at spying and thieving. Disguise magic too strong for anyone here to see through, and perception that can listen to you from three buildings over. Hardly anyone uses privacy

magic here. Few people have the perception to make it worthwhile, so using a privacy screen here makes you stand out more than whispering in a corner in a big black cloak.”

“*That’s* how they found me? Because I was using a privacy shield?”

“It was a data point. Overall, they were very impressed with how you set everything up. They suggested I hire you.”

“For what?”

“I’m trying to build up a staff, to smooth out my return to Earth. It’s going to get complicated, especially once they think they know how powerful I am.”

“Once they think they know?”

“Best they don’t find out how powerful I actually am.”

“And telling me means either you’re lying and want me to tell them, or you don’t think I’ll be able to.”

A sanguine smile was the only response she got.

“You know that going back to Earth is no small thing, magically. I looked into it.”

“I have better options than most.”

“Any options are better options than most. Messenger magic?”

“Amongst other things, but we’re talking about you. Take me through the basics of your operation.”

“Simple enough. A basic protection racket using disenfranchised workers as my leverage. Wouldn’t work in the cities where the industry associations work a lot like unions. In the remote areas, though, it’s all aristocratic owners and exploited workforces. All I had to do was exploit them better. A town meeting here, a pamphlet there. A few well-placed figureheads who are handy with a rhyming slogan. Did you ever see the episode of *Justified* where Boyd Crowder convinces the townsfolk to sell their land to Mags Bennett?”

“How good was Walton Goggins in that? My sister said he had a tooth essence, of all things. Sorry, what was your point?”

“I paid charismatic people with folksy charm and no morals to convince people to do what I want. I may have also accidentally invented country music here.”

“The good kind? I love me some Dolly Parton or Johnny Cash.”

“No. The kind that panders to the audience with iconic rural imagery to mask an underlying political agenda.”

“Maybe I should hand you over to the Adventure Society. You’re a monster.”

“The point is, I rile people up until they cause trouble, then the families pay me to grease the wheels of industry. I get paid and the locals get some token gesture so they feel like they got a win.”

“You didn’t get pushback from the families?”

“They sent some people to look around. Rough up random people. If they were competent, they wouldn’t be working as thugs for aristocrat families at the bottom of the magical barrel. They quickly realised I was careful enough that paying me would be cheaper than finding me.”

“Is that why you did it here, so close to where I lived? The low grade of industry thug?”

“In a way. What the low magic gets me is an absence of everything that high magic gets me. Do you know what it’s like in a big adventuring city?”

“I do.”

“But not in the same way I do, I suspect. You had proper adventurer training. Powerful connections. It’s different when you’re an untrained core user from another world. In the big cities, that makes you a waste of potential at best and an experimental subject at worst.”

“A big change from your treatment on Earth. Low magic zones gave you some of that back?”

“Yes. I got out of Estercost. The whole country is bubbling with magic. I did some wandering. It was easy enough to pass for an aristocrat from some place no one has heard of, on the outs from my family.”

“You seem to have done alright for yourself.”

“I discovered the advantages of low magic zones. They don’t look down on core users as much, and silver rankers are the peak elites. In places like this, I got some of the respect that I missed from Earth. And once I had that, I could make money.”

“For what? I’ve heard you’re raking it in, but if it’s not to fund a wacky necromancer, what are you doing with it?”

“Did you know that you can buy gold-rank monster cores here?”

“So?”

“So? Do you have any sense of how hard those are to get your hands on back on Earth? They let me look at one once. Through reinforced glass while flanked by armed guards. Here, you can just walk into a trade hall and buy them. It takes an ungodly amount of money, thus, the racket, but you can just buy them. For money!”

“You want to reach gold rank?”

“Who doesn’t want to reach gold rank?”

“Fair enough. You couldn’t find anything more legitimate?”

“Breaking into new markets is hard, and I was no mercantile expert on Earth, let alone this planet. But people, when you get down to it, are always the same. Australian, Chinese, elf, leonid. People are people, rich people are rich people, and they do what rich people do.”

“Exploit poor people.”

“Exactly. I’ve been running this game all over. For years, now, going from one low magic zone to the next. Never pushing too hard, never overextending, and never overstaying my welcome. This isn’t the first time I was heading to a sudden and discreet exit. Just the first time I was caught.”

“It’s not what I’d call moral.”

“There are worse things to do that stir up people with legitimate grievances. I may even have accidentally instigated positive social change, once or twice.”

They were passing by a water fountain with a lot of foot traffic moving around it. There was a wide, slightly damp lip for people to sit, and Jason did so. Li Mei followed suit. He contemplated her words for a while, wondering how much was true and what was a lie. He could read the emotions in her aura, but using that as a lie detector was more complicated than he made out. Which he was certain she knew.

He could read her emotions, but her aura control was very solid now, which it had not been on Earth. She was very good at regimenting how her mind was reflected in her aura, making it harder for an observer to glean information from it. He had to respect that, given that it was a talent he excelled at himself.

He also suspected that her actual mind was as well-organised as her aura, something he had *not* excelled at. She was good at framing the facts in such a way that they pointed where she wanted, instead of at the truth.

“If you came to work for me,” he said, “your loyalty would have to be to me. Not China, not one of the magical factions. Not even my clan, back on Earth. To me.”

“You want to offer me a job?”

“Maybe. Haven’t decided, yet.”

“When I saw you in my storage building, I thought it was the end. The dangers back on Earth were sedate for someone like me. When we met, you were fun, naïve, charming. A little dangerous, but that was exciting. By the time you were killing people with your aura on television, I knew all that was left was dangerous. I thought you were a maniac. Then, I’m about to go on the run and there you are. It felt like I was standing with a cliff at my back, and you were there to push me off. I remember what you were like, back on Earth. At the end. No one knew if you were going to make a joke or snap and kill twenty people.”

“I’ve had a lot of therapy. And I know what it’s like to be desperate and alone, in a world you don’t understand. This is not a cliff, Miss Li, and I’m not trying to push you off.”

“So you say. What if I tell you that I don’t want to work for you?”

“Then you can catch a ride back to Earth with the rest. Any earthlings I can round up. I’ll take you all back to Earth, unless you don’t want to go.”

“I want to go. After everything I’ve seen and learned here? I’m going to have so much money and power it’s obscene.”

“Not interested in working for me, then?”

“Of course I’m interested. In this city, diamond rankers are practically a myth but, from what I hear, they’ve been hanging around you like you’re all golf buddies. I’ve heard that you tend to get caught up in crazy things, but everyone in your orbit is wealthy and famous. Standing next to you is like complaining that the hailstones are made of gold. The only problem I’ll have is getting you to trust me. Because you probably shouldn’t.”

“I’m not promising to take you on, just take you to Earth. But if Stella and Lindy say you’re worth it, I’m not going to ignore that.”

“I’m not going to say yes to that. Or no. If your offer is real, I’d like to talk to some of your people. See what I’m potentially getting into.”

“And I need to look into what you’ve been up to before I make that offer. See what kind of person I...”

She looked at him as he trailed off, looking around with suspicion on his expression.

“Something’s here,” he said and stood up off the side of the fountain. “Something that’s very good at—”

A massive sword blade erupted from his chest.

## Chapter 914

### Cook the Crap Out of Some Toast

The blade sticking out of Jason's chest was wide and thick, more suited to bludgeoning than cutting or stabbing. It had been shoved through his body with raw force, the dark metal jutting from his torso. He tried to shove it back out of his body, but his arms wouldn't move. His entire body was paralysed.

He felt the blade draining his energy, but this was no mana drain. It was tapping into the fundamental energy of his being, and that was a problem. His core power flowed from the universe that was his true body, and that power was infinite. His body was unable to contain infinite power, however, and he doubted the sword drinking it in could either. Once one or both reached the limits of their capacity, that magic was going to erupt.

"What the...?"

The words of what presumably was his attacker were timed with a tugging on the sword, but it was lodged in his body. His body wasn't moving either, anchored in place as the power from his universe was leached out, blending into Pallimustus.

Jason was frozen in place, but the surge of power was charging his aura like a toaster running off a fusion reactor. It was going to burn out real soon, but it was going to cook the crap out of some toast. He fired off some quick messages as he expanded his senses over the city. If he couldn't get away from it, he would get everyone else away from him.

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Li Mei was a bundle of frayed nerves. For fifteen years she'd been afraid of meeting Jason Asano again. Would he kill her? Ignore her? Completely forget who she was? When they finally met, the prim, collected persona she built up over the years fell apart. It felt oddly like when her father had sent her to the USA to study, as if nothing she had learned had prepared her for it.

Maybe that's why she fell back into her old patterns from that time. Loose, confused, uncertain. Trying to paint over a rising panic with forced casualness. In the end, none of her fears came to pass. She didn't bear the brunt of old grudges, and she wasn't some forgotten irrelevance. Of all the potential outcomes, she hadn't expected to be offered a job. Her instinct was to leap at the chance, but she knew that two worlds worth of complications would come from that. It was not a decision to be made quickly or lightly.

"And I need to look into what you've been up to before I make that offer," he said as they sat on the lip of the fountain. "See what kind of person I..."

He trailed off, looking around as if he'd heard something suspicious.

"Something's here," he said as he stood up. "Something that's very good at—"

She didn't see it coming. One moment there was nothing, and the next, a man in black and red armour was standing behind Asano. A massive sword, if you could even call it that, had been run through Asano's body. The blade was more a slab of black metal, streaked with red, than a plausible weapon. It looked like something from an anime. Asano wasn't moving, hanging from the blade like a corpse.

The attacker yanked on the blade, but it refused to budge. He said something in a language she didn't know, sounding surprised. That was when a system window appeared in front of her.

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### System Alert: Boko

- A magical incident is taking place in the city of Boko. Occupants will be evacuated immediately. Any successful attempt to resist evacuation will be taken as a claim of personal responsibility for your safety and may result in your death. Please resist the urge to panic. Sorry for the inconvenience.
- Clergy in Boko temples: Please excise all occupants from holy ground so they can be evacuated if your deity will not be shielding them.

---

"What?" Li Mei said, as did many of the people around her. Then aura flooded out of Jason like the descent of a god. Her mind went blank as a whimper escaped her. When she came to her senses, she was floating over the city along with what looked like the entire population, flying over rooftops like a swarm of insects.

There were cries of alarm as others came to and realised what was happening. That aura was still present, battering against her mind like a hurricane ripping at shuttered windows. Below, more people were rising into the air, through windows and out of doors that slammed open. She saw a roof rip itself off a building and set down on a nearby one, a large group rising from the now-open room beneath.

She twisted as much as she could in the air, feeling like she was clutched in some kind of invisible cushion. As best she could tell, the population of Boko were being lifted into the air and being moved directly away from Jason and his attacker.

\*\*\*

Back in Greenstone, Clive was in a bakery. With him was the childlike humanoid version of Onslow, his shell parked on the street like a carriage. Stash was sitting on top of the shell in the form of a young man, drooling over the baked goods displayed in the window.

The staff were gathered around Clive's adorable familiar, handing him free samples as their manager looked on unhappily. Clive gave him an awkward smile and apologetic shrug.

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### System Alert: Boko and Greenstone Region

- A magical incident is taking place in the city of Boko. Occupants are being evacuated. Do not approach or attempt to enter the city.
- Adventurers of silver rank or below in the area, do not approach. Adventurers of gold rank and above (if there's a diamond ranker skulking around, please help!), do not approach the city until after the blast.

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"We're going," Clive said, pushing past the bakery staff to pick Onslow up like a child. He marched outside as Onslow's shell grew even larger to accommodate them. Clive, Stash and mini-Onslow stepped inside, and the shell lifted into the air.

- 
- Jason Asano has initiated group text chat.
  - Jason: Got attacked. Going to blow up and take some or all of Boko with me. Getting people out, need wide-area containment ritual. Will hold on as long as I can. Please move fast.
  - Hump: Are you going to be alright?
  - Jason: No, Humphrey. I'm about to explode and die.
  - Hump: Please list my full name on the text chat.
  - Jason Asano has ended group text chat.

---

As Onslow sped through the air, Clive opened a portal in front of them and they passed through it. They arrived in Boko, in the square set aside for teleport arrivals at the Adventure Society campus. It was a scene of chaos as people streamed out of buildings, dangling in the air as if held by invisible hands. There was yelling and powers being fired off. Clive saw an adventurer teleport and arrive right next to Onslow's shell, looking at it in surprise before yelping as she was yanked into the air again.

Humphrey teleported in with Sophie and Farrah. His mother did the same a moment later with Neil, as well as Gabriel and Arabelle Remore. They piled into Onslow's shell and it took off.

"That message said blast," Danielle said. "That man was born to agitate people."

"You're the wide area ritual magic specialist," Clive said to Farrah. "How fast can you improvise a large containment ritual?"

"Lindy's help would be good," she said. "She's the improvisation expert. We'll need your abilities to cast something that big, that fast, though."

Shade emerged from Farrah's shadow.

"Miss Belinda is being flown here as we speak," he said. "Miss Estella is being evacuated with everyone else."

"Shade, what's happening?" Humphrey asked.

"Mr Asano has been subject to an attack. The attack is apparently an attempt to kill him using some weapon that drains his power. Unfortunately, his power is infinite, and the weapon just keeps draining it."

"And it's going to reach a threshold where either the weapon or Jason's avatar can't contain it and it's going to blow up," Clive realised. "We need to get this ritual going fast."

"What about the attacker?" Humphrey asked.

"The attacker is currently unknown, but appears to be a human in armour. He also appears to be stuck to Mr Asano, which appears to be a surprise to him."

"I don't think my skill set will help us here," Danielle said. "I'm going to find the city leaders and see if I can help bring some order to what is going to be panic and chaos. Gabriel, Arabelle, will you join me?"

"Gabe will," Arabelle said. She was staring out at the people still flying out of the city, screaming and yelling. "I'm going to start organising healers. Even if everyone gets out alive, this is going to be a mess. Neil, will you join me?"

"Of course," Neil said.

\*\*\*

Four Voices of the Will stood around a viewing pool. The image in the still water was from a vantage point far above Boko, and they watched their assassin appear. His weapon punched through Asano's body, which went limp.

"It's done," one of them said.

"Our forces are marshalled," said another.

"Prepare to activate the gates," the third commanded.

“It is time,” the fourth said, “for an example to be made. To the denizens of this world, and our own kind, too timid to act.”

\*\*\*

Onslow wove a path through the air, Clive standing atop his shell. A trail of gold was left behind by Clive’s outstretched hand, sky-writing a massive ritual circle. As he went, the runes on Onslow’s shell lit up and floated into the air, becoming part of the ritual. Inside the shell, Farrah and Belinda were madly going through books and scribbling notes, yelling up instructions at Clive.

“How are we doing?” Farrah asked Humphrey.

“Uh, quite well,” Humphrey said, sounding surprised. He was standing at the edge of the shell, holding out a measuring device Clive had given him. It looked like a glass plate with an image like shifting water projected onto it. A rod ending in an orb jutted from the bottom.

“It should not be really good,” Belinda said.

“It says the power levels are decreasing.”

“Sophie,” Belinda said, eyes still on her work. “Please make sure he’s not holding it upside down.”

“Is the rod and orb thing meant to pointing up or down?” Sophie asked.

“Up.”

Humphrey sheepishly turned the device around in his hands, then looked at the readings again.

“Oh,” he said. “It’s going really badly.”

“It’s okay,” Sophie said, patting him on the shoulder. “You’re still pretty.”

\*\*\*

Jason’s body was still frozen and his overcharged aura was growing more unstable by the moment. He ignored the pain searing through his body as the power ramped up. It was enough that if he let go, he would explode, and he wanted to do exactly that. The longer he held on, the greater the blast would be, but the containment ritual wasn’t yet in place.

He had sent the city residents as far away as he could. He’d dropped them in the desert, as far as he could from the city walls. It would hopefully be enough to save them from the blast, so long as it was contained. The city was now empty, other than his team and anyone who could hide from his aura senses. The temples were dark to his perception, and there could always be some powerful people lying low. They would have to take care of themselves.

- 
- Jason Asano has initiated group text chat.
  - Jason: How long?
  - Clive: Almost done. Look up.
  - Jason: Can't. Paralysed. I think my attacker was sent by the messengers.
  - Hump: Why is that?
  - Jason: He's stuck here and just yelling at me now. I'm a little distracted, but he's yelling about the messengers and some kind of deal.
  - Danielle: The messengers don't make deals with anyone but other messengers.
  - Sophie: Yes, they do. They made a deal with the fake god of purity, and they made one with Jason about saving Yaresh.
  - Hump: Jason, is there any way we can get you out of this alive?
  - Jason: Not that doesn't come with unacceptable risk. Don't worry: coming back from the dead is kind of my thing. Well, my avatar's thing. I'm immortal, obviously.
  - Neil: Really? I didn't know that. Have you tried mentioning it every ten minutes? Oh, wait, you have.
  - Clive: Your avatar dying might just be the beginning of whatever this is. I'm getting some kind of interference on the ritual from above the city. Far above. It's at a high enough altitude that I can adjust as I draw out the ritual, but something is going on up there.
  - Hump: Sophie and I will check it out. And fix my name in the chat.
  - Sophie: There are more important things going on than how your name appears in the chat. Also, what are we doing for lunch today?
  - Gabriel: Is this always the way you operate? How did you become a famous adventuring team like this?
  - Arabelle: Oh, like we were any better. You remember what Emir was like.
  - Neil: Clive was getting lunch from that bakery.
  - Gabriel: Jason is going to die.
  - Farrah: You get used to it. I think if he goes long enough without anyone killing him, he kills himself for practise.
  - Jason: I do nordgldfjce.

- Farrah: What?
  - Jason: Sorry, I'm running on the edge here. In all seriousness, please, please hurry. I can't hold this much longer.
  - Clive: Almost there. And we had to leave the bakery before our order came up.
  - Jason: No sandwiches? Okay, now I'm having a bad day.
- 

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The Duke of Boko looked at Gabriel's increasingly worried expression.

"Is something bad happening?" he asked.

"Don't worry about him," Danielle said. "That's about something else."

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Fragments of Jason's body were turning to rainbow smoke and coming off him in streams. He still hung limp, impaled on the sword that was stuck in place as if by glue. Jason was long past recognising his surroundings and hadn't seen his attacker cut his own arm off. It hadn't helped, the severed stump still gripped by the magic.

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- Clive: Done and we're clear.
- 

Jason exploded. It was perfectly silent, eradicating everything in its path in a wave of gold, silver and blue light. It expanded out until it reached the invisible dome of the containment spell, covering most of the city. The dome became visible, shedding blue and gold light. It was comprised of interlinked hexes, each with a rune set into it.

The dome shuddered, the runes glowing brightly while emitting a high pitch sound. The tone lowered over time, from a screech, all the way down to a thunderous rumble. By which point the dome was shaking like a bouncy castle full of kids hopped up on sugar. The runes started going dark, first at scattered points and then in larger clusters.

\*\*\*

Jason's friends looked back as they flew across the sky inside Onslow. He was fast and they didn't want to risk a portal with so much magic floating around. The dome wouldn't last long, and they could all feel the magic from above, now.

"That's portal magic," Humphrey said. "I've never felt it on that scale. How does that even work in a low-magic zone like this?"

"I don't know," Clive said.

They leaned out of the shell to look up. As they had sensed, massive portals started opening up in the sky.

“We’ve seen this before,” Humphrey said.

“Yes, we have,” Clive said grimly as messengers geysered from the portals. “I’m not sure what to do about that.”

Their eyes were drawn back to the dome as explosions started sounding out. Hexes were shattering and force was shooting out through the gaps. The gaps grew larger and larger, letting more force out, but most of it had been spent while the dome still held. Inside the dome, the light was gone, as was almost any trace of the city.

A perfect sphere had been carved out of the ground, as if simply deleted, leaving behind only smooth, round sides. The only remnants of the city were temples now floating in the air, shielded from the blast by divine power. The only other thing in the sphere was a small cloud of darkness, within which sparks of ethereal light danced like the ghosts of fireflies.

The stillness inside the space was sharply contrasted by violence outside of it. The explosive force from the detonating dome tore through the parts of the city left outside the containment area. Buildings were levelled and gardens stripped down to the dirt. Trees and chunks of building were flung through the air, adding to the damage. Onslow sealed the sides of his shell to protect his occupants, mini-Onslow clinging to Clive’s leg as the shell rocked like a boat in a storm.

“We need to regroup with the others,” Humphrey said. “I didn’t see how many messengers that was, or how strong they were, but we’re about to have a fight on our hands. They knew this was coming, and we didn’t, so expect them to have every advantage.”

“Isn’t this normally the part where Jason comes back to life and does something ridiculous?” Belinda asked.

They all looked at each other, then waited awkwardly.

“Okay,” Humphrey said. “It would have been nice. But it looks like—”

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### **System Alert: Sacred Phoenix**

➤ [System Administrator] assassinated. The Hegemon has arisen. Beware his wrath.

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## Chapter 915

### The Benevolence of a Nightmare God

The city of Boko was gone. The outer regions had been left as little more than rubble when the blast containment zone gave out, and the space within the zone was just a hole carved out of the ground. All that remained were floating temples, shielded by their gods, and a cloud of darkness in the middle.

In the wake of the destruction, numerous massive portals had opened, high above the ruins. Sheets of gold, silver and blue light, they disgorged an army of messengers into the sky. This was no heavenly host, however, as they descended from the sky in the direction of the city's survivors. Most of Boko's ninety thousand people had been evacuated.

Jason had used aura control to bodily lift them out of the city. His aura had been overcharged with a flood of power from his astral kingdom, making the astounding feat possible. But as the power had grown, and Jason's avatar further degraded, his control over that power had slipped. His aura became a spiritual wildfire, beyond his ability to contain or direct.

Local essence users did their best to protect the low rankers around them from it, but they were weak and poorly trained themselves. Many normal-rank evacuees, mostly the very old and the very young, were outright killed. Brain haemorrhages and heart attacks took those too weak to survive the stress the aura placed on them.

Then the blast came, and the aura was gone. There was an eerie stillness, like the calm before the storm, as the messengers descended in silence. Adventurers prepared to fend off the assault, but the messengers kept gushing from the portals by the thousand. Boko was not a strong adventuring city, and even with visiting gold rankers, the battle ahead was a grim proposition.

Then the aura came back. It was just as powerful now, if not more so, but no longer harmful to the people of Boko. It was completely stable and in control, calming those previously traumatised by it, even settling some of the panic that set in from the evacuation. It was a promise to shield them from those who had taken their homes and were even now descending from the sky. A promise to make their attackers pay, and to make them pay in torment. It was the benevolence of a nightmare god, filled with wrath at the transgression against his chosen. Those it protected, the confused and despairing, gained fresh hope. More than that, they gained a shared certainty that it was about to become a very bad day to be a messenger.

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## System Alert: Sacred Phoenix

➤ [System Administrator] assassinated. The Hegemon has arisen. Beware his wrath.

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A dark shape rose from the hole in the ground that was once the city of Boko and ascended towards the messengers. A vast, dark bird, speckled with lights like a starry night, limned in ethereal silver flames. It made no sound, yet the same aura that offered hope to the people below resounded like thunder to the messengers.

It erupted amongst them like an explosion, battering them into one another. Wings and limbs tangled, turning diving attacks into uncontrolled falls. The messengers fell into chaos, their formations falling apart as they were knocked around like laundry in a tumble dryer.

The adventurers on the ground had been steeling their resolve for the battle ahead. Now they watched as the bird of flame-wreathed darkness rose to meet the messenger army. It flew into the host, not crashing into them but passing through like a ghost. Every messenger it touched began a process of slow, miserable death. Their skin blackened with necrosis and feathers fell from shrivelled wings. Ethereal fire flared on their bodies, the ghost flame not burning but accelerating the rot.

From the dying messengers, butterflies of blue and orange started to emerge and spread to others not yet affected. Each one that reached a messenger put them on the same path to a torturous demise. More butterflies spread from them in turn, as their flesh decayed and their bodies lit up with ethereal silver flames.

The messengers attacked the butterflies to stave them off but, on destruction, the butterflies turned into clouds of sparks. The clouds moved slowly, but the messengers were thick in the air and still being battered by the aura. The sparks didn't spread more butterflies, but anything they touched still decayed.

The ghost fire phoenix arced a graceful path through the messenger host. The heart of the invading army had become a realm of misery and death. On the periphery, messengers gave up on the attack and were fleeing as fast as their wings would carry them. Their wings cast shadows onto their bodies from the sun overhead, and from those shadows came their doom.

Shadowy arms, thrust out of the shadows on their bodies, like spiders digging their way out of egg sacks. The dark limbs were angular and macabre, and each held an ornate black and red dagger. Those daggers stabbed into the messengers again and again, the wounds swiftly turning black as the flesh around it died.

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Danielle Geller looked up in the sky as the dark bird rose from the ruins of Boko to meet the messengers head on. She breathed a sigh of relief as she saw the power on display. It was immediately apparent that her greatest fear, an attack on the evacuated populace, had been forestalled.

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### **System Alert: Ambient Magic Change**

- The Hegemon's mortal form has been fatally compromised. While it is being reconstituted, the Hegemon has entered a liminal state in which his power is not limited by a mortal form. [Ghost Fire Phoenix] draws power from the Hegemon's astral kingdom and is not subject to external power limitations.
- High levels of magic are being introduced to the area from the Hegemon's astral kingdom. Magical density and magical saturation of the region are being temporarily increased. Stability of the dimensional membrane in this region is compromised.
- The Hegemon has chosen to limit his power to prevent a localised rupture in this reality's dimensional membrane. Presence of the Hegemon is reinforcing dimensional stability. The performance of dimensional magic may be inconsistent until conditions return to normal.

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She frowned at the system message. This was god-level business, and that was when innocent people got killed. Collateral damage in the wars of giants. She turned her attention back to the scattered people of Boko, milling in an understandable panic. She did note that the rise of the bird and the aura that came with it had a blessedly calming effect on the people, as reflected in their own auras.

She saw immediately that the biggest threat after the messengers would be the sun. The locals were used to the climate, but that included making thorough preparations before heading out into the desert. Being ripped from their homes and dropped amongst the empty dunes was the opposite of being prepared; as the early afternoon heat intensified, things were only going to get worse.

Of tens of thousands of evacuated citizens, most were normal rank, and would die without water and shelter. They were also traumatised by exposure to Jason's unstable aura, many left incapacitated and some even killed. Those ostensibly in charge were struggling to find one another, let alone bring any kind of order of the chaos. People were doing their best, be they adventurers, Adventure Society officials, civic administrators or simply anyone else able to keep their heads.

Small groups were doing what they could on their own. A local Magic Society official had managed to get some of his people together and start distributing a simple climate

control ritual that would set up small zones that cooled the people within. While each zone could only accommodate a few families, the ritual only required spirit coins as a material component. It was also simple enough that anyone with a basic knowledge of ritual magic could enact.

It was a race against time as the desert heat ramped up. Fortunately, the increased level of magic Jason had created made larger and more powerful rituals an option. The efforts to implement those were being led by ritual magic experts like Clive, Farrah and Belinda. Clive had even put aside his scorn for the Magic Society to take charge of their people.

The Magic Society branch director let the higher rank Clive take charge of the magic, focusing instead on finding and organising his people. He was issuing directives as Clive drew out a massive ritual diagram nearby. He looked at the lines of golden light, a match for the ones he'd seen drawn in the air during the evacuation.

"Were you the one who put up that containment dome?" he asked.

"Not just me, but yes."

"How did you use magic on that scale when the magic level is so low?"

"The containment dome fed off the magic it was containing."

"And you just happened to have a perfectly calibrated ritual designed to do that over such a large area, in these specific conditions, with that specific kind of energy?"

"Of course not, but I was already familiar with the energy in question. The rest we figured out as we went."

"Are you saying you improvised a city-scale, off-rank ritual magic off the top of your head?"

"Like I said, I didn't do it by myself."

"Even so, that's madness."

"Look around, Director. When you get days like these, only madness will do."

"You say that like you've seen things like this before."

"Not many times, but yes."

"Who are you people?"

Belinda ducked in front of the director and shook his hand.

"Team Biscuit, pleased to meet you. Clive, you done? We need you."

"Give me thirty seconds."

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The messenger army had departed from a shared staging area inside a region on the far side of the planet. Massive portal gates floated in the air, through which the army had

departed, leaving behind only a fraction of the forces belonging to the four astral kings who owned them.

Inside a nearby room, four Voices of the Will were observing the far side of the portal gates through a viewing pool. They watched as the ghost fire phoenix ravaged their army. Although none of them would ever voice the sentiment, each were happy that their portals only operated one way. They were startled when they sensed a new portal open in the staging area, but a small one, sized for a person.

The messenger who emerged could have passed for a very tall human. His wings were nowhere to be seen and he stood only seven feet tall, short for a messenger. His clothes, brown and dark red, were more fitted than the loose apparel most messengers favoured. He also walked on the ground in boots, rather than floating over it in bare feet or sandals.

He strode across the staging area, a furious expression on his face. Every messenger who looked his way fell to the ground and had a seizure. He reached the room containing the four Voices, and instead of flying in through the entrance above, he tore a hole in the wall with his aura. Inside, the Voices lined up like soldiers under inspection.

“I have no interest in dealing with minions,” the newcomer said, his fury caged inside his curt tone. “Get out here. Now.”

The four Voices floated to the ground and dropped to one knee. Above each, a ghostly image of their astral king appeared. The astral kings all bowed their heads before the man who had called on them.

“We pay respect to Jamis Fran Muskar,” one of them said.

“Respect?” Jamis snarled. “You directly defied the explicit instructions of the Council of Kings, and then have the mind-bogglingly incomprehensible GALL to utter the word ‘respect’ to me?”

“We felt—”

“It doesn’t matter what you felt. It matters what you were told.”

“We are all astral kings, Jamis Fran Muskar. The Council of Kings may guide us, but you do not rule us.”

Jamis stared at him, the anger in his expression replaced with contemplation.

“We let you think that,” he said, “so you wouldn’t go off and do something stupid out of misguided rebellion. But since you’ve gone and done it for the sake of stupidity, let me make it clear: yes, we rule you. And you will pay for your defiance.”

“Jason Asano—”

“Matters a lot more than you. How old are you all? A few centuries? A millennium? What have you accomplished, beyond treading the path that was laid out for you? We are the ones who allowed you to become astral kings, and what have you done with that opportunity? Walked the most well-trodden road you could find. Never deviating. Never innovating. Never setting your own course. Asano has accomplished more in half a century than all of you put together.”

“Many of those accomplishments come at our cost!”

“So? Which of us has not fought against another of our kind? We are kings, with few true sins to be committed, yet you seem intent on committing them all. Let us start listing them with your loss of control. Your diamond rankers refused to take part in this debacle. That is what we call a hint that you may want to reconsider your approach.”

“Mah Go Schaat convinced our diamond rankers to abstain.”

“Wisely,” Jamis said, gesturing at the viewing pool. “That is cosmic power he’s wielding out there. He’s holding back so he doesn’t blow a hole in the side of the universe. If they had faced Asano like that, they’d have died, just as Mah Go Schaat did. And, in the absence of your diamond rankers, you committed the second sin: debasing yourself by making a deal with lesser beings. A deal that I am now obligated to honour, despite the disaster you’ve made of it. Which brings us to your final and greatest sin: failure.”

“Who could have anticipated something like this?”

“THE COUNCIL OF KINGS!” Jamis roared, as if shouting could drill his words through a wall of obstinate stupidity.

“The council explains nothing.”

“Because the council does not answer to you. You answer to it, and when you decided not to, you made a grand mess that I now have to clean up.”

“What would you have us do? Is Asano allowed to strike at us, without our striking back?”

“Yes. He is of my kind, not yours.”

“We are all astral kings.”

“But we are not all relevant. I don’t know your names, and after today, you should be very careful about my not needing to find them out. You are inconsequential, when I’d offer him a seat on the Council of Kings today. If he’d take it.”

“He is our enemy.”

“For now, yes. But he is fighting us in passing. Protecting his lands and his people, as any of us would. What you have done here will echo through time. Asano is one of us, and will be forever. You’re trying to kill him why? To deny him a prime avatar for a quarter of a

century? Let's put aside the fact that he will certainly find a way to shave most, if not all of that time away. The real point is that it leaves an eternity for him to remember."

"We are immortal. He cannot kill us, however much he wants it."

"And he won't. But a millennium from now, someone is going to tell you that every birthing planet you own just got destroyed. We need him to forget the concerns of his mortal life, and you are searing them into his mind."

"Is your intention to try and punish us?"

"I don't have to," Jamis said. "I already told you that he's one of us. Your failure to grasp the ramifications of that only compounds your failure."

"Ramifications?"

Jamis grinned.

"There are many, but what should concern you right now is one of the most fundamental. It apparently never occurred to you that, as an astral king, he has an astral gate."

That was when they sensed the shift in the portals outside. The sheets of gold, silver and blue energy trembled like a pond during an earthquake. Then the one-way portals were suddenly two-way, and dark tentacles burst through. Heading straight for the building, some passed through the hole Jamis had made, while others made holes of their own.

The images of the astral kings vanished, their confused Voices of the Will coming to their senses just in time to get grabbed. A tentacle went after Jamis, throwing off sparks like an arc welder as it met an invisible barrier and was stopped dead. Jamis stood casually, hands in his pockets as the voices were dragged away.

## Chapter 916

### Pretext

The messenger host of more than ten thousand had been cut down to stragglers. A swarm of shadowy figures dashed through the air through the air, collecting the rotted husks of the dead as they fell. The bodies were all dropped into the hole where the city of Boko had once been. The great portals in the air were gone, having trembled and ultimately collapsed.

The last messengers to emerge had been dragged out by the dark bird wreathed in silver flame. Tendrils of darkness had extended from its body, reached into the portals and dragged out four Voices of the Will. Even bound up, they had started to domineeringly demand their freedom. Their arguments lasted only a few words before the tendrils cut them into slices like vegetables. The shadowy figures moved to collect the pieces and deposit them with the rest.

When the last of the messengers were dead, the ghost fire phoenix descended into the hole, now host to a small mountain of corpses. The bird shrank as it neared the bottom of the hole, transforming into a naked man as it reached the ground. Blood seeped from the man's pores to cover his body, then coagulated and dried into a set of dark red robes.

"Thank you, Colin," Jason said quietly.

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#### **System Alert: System Administrator**

- The Hegemon has reconstituted his mortal form. External magic will no longer be introduced to the region. Magic density and magical saturation will return to normal levels over time.
- The Hegemon no longer claims dominion over the region and the gods may once again influence the area, outside of their claimed holy grounds.

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Jason grimaced as he stared at the pile of dead. He no longer had trouble maintaining his identity while in a transcendent state, but it was still a deeply altered state of mind. In that condition, his emotions were pushed aside. It was useful for acting with a clear head, but the emotions had returned now he once more occupied a mortal avatar.

His true self was a living universe from which he projected his consciousness, but that was something he was still getting used to. He remained mortal in many ways, especially in mindset. It was not something he regretted, even as it subjected him to negative emotions. He'd felt people die under the influence of his aura, helpless to stop it. Anger and regret roiled inside him, and that was something he did not want to lose.

He looked up at the temples floating in the air. They still had chunks of ground underneath them, torn from the city during its destruction and shielded by the power of the various gods. Now that Jason had withdrawn his influence over the area, the temples were on the move, drifting up and out of the massive hole. Moving in as they departed was a flying tortoise shell full of adventurers. Jason's team gathered around him, looking him over with concern.

"I'm fine," he said to the unasked question, but the grim quiet in his voice was unconvincing. "Do we know how many people died yet?"

"It's still a mess out there," Farrah said. "We won't have a solid number for a while. Hundreds, certainly. Probably over a thousand. Hopefully not over two."

"This isn't your fault, Jason," Humphrey said. "It may have been your aura, but—"

"I know where the blame lies," Jason said. "For the most part, anyway. The messengers are dead, although they had someone far more powerful with them. Him, I couldn't touch."

"Not a messenger?"

"An astral king. In a prime avatar, like me, but without the power reduction. His strength was somewhere around Dawn's level."

"That's a bad enemy to have," Neil said.

"I'm not sure he was an enemy. Something in his aura. The only other astral king I've dealt with is Vesta Carmis Zell, and her hostility burned like a fire. This man was calm. Detached. At least towards me. The only anger I felt was directed at the Voices of the Will."

"The ones you dragged out of the portals and chopped up?" Belinda asked.

"Yes."

"What are you doing with all these bodies, anyway?" Sophie asked.

"You might want to stand back for this," Jason warned them, then quietly incanted a spell.

*"As your lives were mine to reap, so your deaths are mine to harvest."*

A red glow rose from the mountain of corpses as Jason's spell drew out the remnant life force. The air was flooded with the coppery taste of blood, the life force tingling at the senses of Jason's friends as they backed off. The red light gushed out like a wave to crash over Jason, obscuring him from sight until the torrent of life force diminished and finally depleted.

Shade had touched all the bodies while collecting them, so Jason was able to loot them all at once. The mountain broke down as the bodies dissolved into rainbow smoke. A

vast plume rose from the hole in the ground, rising into the sky as if from an active volcano. Jason's friends backed off even further from the stench. Jason didn't move, standing and watching until it was done. Jason's friends approached again, once it was safe for their noses.

"Is that enough to restore your avatar with the bird thing again if your avatar is killed a second time?" Neil asked.

"No," Jason said. "It was a lot, but not enough. Too many silver rankers and not enough golds."

"We need to hunt some gold-rank messengers, then," Sophie said.

Jason pulled a sword from his inventory that was more like a metal gangplank than a sword, despite the lengthy handle. The metal was dark, with red streaks. He held it out for Clive.

"Something from the loot?" Clive asked.

"No. When I was on the verge of erupting, the power around me became volatile and killed the man who stabbed me with this. Once it was no longer in someone else's possession, I could pull it into my inventory. I was able to discharge it safely in my soul realm, but the power inside my body was too far gone. I couldn't stop it from detonating, even though the thing causing the problem was removed."

Clive took the hefty weapon in both hands and examined it.

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Item: [Lesser Celestial Gorger (broken)] (gold rank, uncommon)

*A specialised weapon designed to absorb magic from matter that combines physical and spiritual energy. It is a crude attempt to replicate a more sophisticated weapon. The large size is to accommodate crude adaptations when the original design could not be functionally duplicated. This weapon has been damaged by excess magic absorption. (weapon, replica, broken).*

➤ Effect: Specialised magic absorption (non-functional).

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"This is designed to kill gestalt entities like you," Clive said.

"Someone designed a weapon just to kill Jason?" Humphrey asked.

"I doubt it," Clive said. "It was probably designed to kill messengers."

"Do you think you can figure out where it came from?" Jason asked. "Someone other than the messengers was involved with this."

"Why would someone with a messenger-killing sword be working with the messengers?" Humphrey asked. "More than that, why would the messengers work with them? They like obedience, not bargains, but I don't see anyone with a messenger-slaying

sword being one of their cowed slaves. And sneaking up on Jason is no small feat, given the power of his senses.”

“I think his armour might have been designed to hide from messengers,” Jason said. “I couldn’t grab it to check, but even when he was right behind me, he was hard to examine. It was like my perception just slid off him.”

“It might be possible,” Clive said. “Our supernatural senses use our auras as a base, and gestalt entities have fundamentally different auras. You could target those aura aspects with specialised stealth equipment. It wouldn’t work against regular essence users, but it would have superior effects against Jason or messengers.”

“Anything we can use to track my attacker down?” Jason asked.

“I don’t know. I have some knowledge of magic devices, but we need a specialist for something like this. There used to be someone in Greenstone, Russel Clouns. He helped us figure out what the Builder cult devices did, when the cultists were trying to steal astral spaces. I can check if he’s still around.”

“You might want to show Carlos Quilido, as well,” Neil said.

“Why Carlos?” Clive asked. “He’s a soul healing specialist.”

“Early in the war,” Neil explained, “he was involved in research on anti-messenger weapons. They thought his speciality might help. Inflicting spiritual damage rather than healing it. Remember when he wanted to experiment on Jason’s gestalt body?”

“I do,” Jason said. “You think he’ll know something?”

“He might not,” Neil said. “Carlos is a priest of the Healer, like me. Using our knowledge of healing techniques to design weapons is the opposite of what we do. Carlos realised he’d lost his way after what happened with Jason and left the project early. Refocused on his vampirism cure project.”

“We can ask and see where it goes,” Humphrey said. “We’ll need to put off our current agenda to hunt down—”

“No,” Jason said. “If we were the right team to follow this thread, that would be one thing. But I think this will be a long, slow investigation. This weapon was some kind of replica. I think whoever is using it might be a group, not just one person who decided to work for the messengers on this. The only thing we have to go on is this sword, and if Clive says we should hand it over to a specialist, we should. Let the Adventure Society deal with it.”

“They came after you!” Sophie said.

“It’s not about me. I’m alive, but there are plenty of people who aren’t. I’m not going after some group with weapons specialised not just to hurt me, but turn me into a walking

disaster zone for any innocent people around me. We can probably manage the risk, now that we know about it, but I'd rather not have to."

"I don't like the idea of letting some mysterious group just float around out there," Belinda said. "We don't know what they want, or when they're going to strike next. Stella and I could—"

"No," Jason said again. "I lost fifteen years letting other people turn me away from my own intentions. I'm not going to let the messengers or whoever is behind this sword dictate my actions."

"We can't just let this stand," Sophie said.

"We won't," Jason said. "I killed all the messengers here. I even dragged out their Voices of the Will and killed them, too, but that doesn't matter. The astral kings don't care about their slaves. They'll live forever and just churn out more as they keep going. This planet, the next one, going on forever."

"That's disheartening," Neil said. "You're saying there's nothing we can do?"

"There's something I can do," Jason told him. "They have forever, but so do I. So do you, if you reach diamond rank and stop getting older. We can't kill immortals, but we can destroy everything they've built up. Right now, I'm vulnerable. There are too many people I care about that they can hurt. A thousand years from now, those people will be strong enough to protect themselves, or long dead. I can spend an eternity unmaking messenger society. Burning every birthing tree. Razing every indoctrination centre. Freeing every slave and turning them against their masters, until the only messengers left don't serve the astral kings, but fight them. It might take a million years. A billion, but I have a billion. What I need is a purpose to fill all that time."

Jason looked around at his friends. They watched him with worried eyes as, with calm determination, he announced a billion-year jihad.

"Perhaps we should focus on a more immediate timeframe," Humphrey suggested. "Let's get back to helping the displaced population. You might want to donate all the loot from those messengers to the reconstruction... Jason?"

Jason had turned his head as Humphrey was talking, staring at an empty space nearby. Moments later, a portal appeared and a man stepped out. He was extremely tall, with copper hair and dark eyes. His clothes were red and brown, cut in the fitted Estercost style. Jason saw what he was immediately, while his friends were wary but uncertain.

Humphrey conjured his armour and sword as he stepped to the fore.

"It's alright, Humphrey," Jason said. "He's here to talk."

“Who is he?” Humphrey asked not taking his eyes from the man. “And how can you be sure?”

“I don’t know who he is, just what he is. And I’m not sure, but if he wants to kill us, there’s nothing we can do to stop him. But I don’t think he’s willing to pay the price.”

“The price?” Sophie asked, moving next to Humphrey.

“Authority is a complicated thing, and there are rules to invading a world. You think the messengers needed locals to summon them to start their invasion? With the dimensional magic they have? Those summonings were an invitation. A pretext for the messengers to intrude on our world.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Neil asked.

“This man is an astral king,” Jason said. “That’s a prime avatar, like mine, but he has fully developed his mortal power.”

“This is the one you mentioned earlier,” Humphrey realised.

“Yes. But there are rules, and if an astral king acts directly, the gods get a pretext of their own. They’ll start scouring messengers from the face of the planet like sweeping up crumbs.”

He brushed past Humphrey and Sophie.

“Isn’t that right, Mr Astral King?”

“The name is Jamis Fran Muskar,” the man said, after patiently waiting for Jason and his team’s discussion. “I’ve been looking forward to meeting you, Jason Asano.”

## Chapter 917

### Eternity Awaits Us

“I’ve been looking forward to meeting you, Jason Asano.”

Jason’s feet lifted off the ground as he floated forward, coming eye to eye with the much taller man. His friends watched warily from behind.

“Why are you here?”

“These are not the circumstances under which I hoped we would meet. I am here to apologise. I won’t pretend that the people who died here matter to me. That I care about the homes they’ve lost or the impact this will have on their entire lives. But those things matter to you, and *that* matters to me.”

“If you think an empty apology will make me less angry instead of more, you have made a dire miscalculation.”

“I do not intend it to be empty, but we can discuss that in a moment. You and I will know each other for longer than time can measure. This first meeting is no small thing, and I would like to do it properly. When I said these are not the circumstances I hoped for, that was not just a glib line.”

Jason stared at the messenger for a long time.

“Who are you, Jamis Fran Muskar?”

“I am a member of the Council of Kings, as you have most likely guessed. Some consider me the leader of it, although it has no such thing.”

“Why do I get the feeling that it does?”

A flicker of a smile teased the messenger’s lips for just a moment.

“A first amongst equals, perhaps. Do not expect me to repeat that in other company, however. Sometimes, to lead means standing behind. You are just beginning your political education, but I have no doubt that time will see you master the nuances.”

“You know me.”

“You first came to my attention during your conflict with Vesta Carmis Zell, whose influence has sharply diminished after her failures here. Pursuing her own objectives while the rest of us moved with shared purpose was a dangerous move for her, politically. Failing was disastrous. She was never the most influential member of the council, and now even her position on it is in danger.”

“Will she be back?”

“No. Her objective was lost to you, and to join the larger cause now would look like crawling back. She needs to cut her losses and rebuild her power base with other endeavours.”

“Then I don’t care.”

“No? In time, she will come at you again.”

“Let her.”

A smile twitched on Jamis’ lips again.

“Good,” he said. “Dwelling on defeated enemies is not the way of one who stands at the pinnacle. It is the attitude that an original should have. Do you know much about the originals?”

“No.”

“I know this is far from an opportune time, but would you like to?”

Jason frowned. He glanced back at his companions, their expressions all saying no. Even Clive, information hungry as he was.

“It’s fine,” he told them, then turned back to Jamis. “Let’s take a walk.”

He drifted to the ground and set off, across the curved base of the massive hole. He walked through the space where the mountain of messenger corpses had been, but no trace of them remained. Every scrap and stain had dissolved into rainbow smoke. The crater was barely curved at the bottom, being the size of a city. It was barren and smooth, sealed by the power that hollowed it out.

“The originals are like you,” Jamis said. “Those who were not messengers yet became astral kings anyway, except they were never just astral kings. You, the astral nexus, blend elements of gods, astral kings, and great astral beings. The astral colossus has a prime avatar larger than most planets. He spends his time drifting through the void of various universes for reasons I could never determine. The astral beast has no prime avatar, as you and I would understand it. He possesses armies of living creatures, spawned from his astral kingdom.”

“You’re not an original. You’re a normal astral king.”

“To my envy, I am not of your kind. I told the fools who attacked you that they were not like you and I, but the truth is, I am closer to them than you. Messengers and astral kings are obsessed with superiority, but the truth is, you stand above us all. We tell ourselves differently, but those of us who remember the originals know. Even the name we changed. You were called originators, at first, but it didn’t fit with the myths we built around ourselves.”

“Originators. The originals were the origin of the messengers?”

“Yes. We were your messengers. But, over time, the originators retreated into obscurity. More rose, from time to time, but few are like you, Jason Asano. Left to our own devices, we started telling ourselves stories. That we were the prime species of the cosmos, messengers of the cosmic will. Our originators became the originals, not our makers but merely the first of us.”

“But you know all this.”

“We are immortal. Records are almost as easy to find as wilful ignorance, and I am a student of our history. And we do encounter them, from time to time. Stumble into whatever interest they’re pursuing. Sometimes we even fight them, as we are fighting you here. Most are older than us. Your youth is part of what makes you such a contentious figure for us.”

“Why are you telling me all this?”

“My interest here is in the future. You and I will still know each other when this planet has been swallowed by its sun. Our relationship will be so much more than this world. This war. I want you to understand what you are, and what we are. That there are those, like me, who understand that the originals are more than just astral kings. That you stand above us.”

“Most of your kind don’t see it that way.”

“But they feel it. That is why their reaction to you is so polarised. You trigger an instinct within us, to fight you or obey you, because you make us want to kneel.”

“But not enough that I can make you leave this planet.”

“Instincts can be overcome.”

“Why do you need this? What makes the Purity artefact so precious you would spend lives by the tens of thousands to obtain it?”

“Because of you. The originals. You can come from every species except the messengers, and I want to change that. To be like you. More than just an astral king. But that is not something one can become from simple desire. It takes the right circumstance, the right opportunity, and this relic is the beginning of that for me.”

“You want to be an original.”

“Yes. You are each unique. All of you reached that point in different ways, and I would do so as well. But to snatch that chance, it takes a resolve that never wavers. Whatever the damage, whatever the cost, you must seize the opportunity when it appears. You are one of the few who truly understand this.”

“Then you know me less well than you think. I don’t do what I do for power. That came as a consequence of fighting for the things you dismiss. The price of your power. To

you, the lives of innocent people are a cost. To me, they are the entire point. I am not an astral king first, or an original. I'm an adventurer."

He moved in front of Jamis, staring up at him.

"And adventurers stand between innocent people and things like you."

"Yes. I know that what has happened here will only further poison you against us. My hope is to ameliorate that damage. You and I are enemies, today, but eternity awaits us. I hope that one day, you and I can be friends. Amongst my kind, such sentiment is considered a warning sign of Unorthodoxy sympathising."

"I am going to burn down your entire civilisation. Do you think we can be friends after that?"

"I do. Perhaps we can even change things together, but that is for another day. On this one, I have come to make an apology. Not an empty one, although I know there can be no true restitution for what my people have done here. Turning the power you use to protect into the weapon that killed a city. It was not the council's intention, for what little that is worth. The council's directive to not target you was explicit, but those instructions were defied. The plan to attack you was not sanctioned."

"What was the plan? Use the weapon to kill me and the city, then occupy the rubble with their army?"

"The interaction of your power with the weapon was unanticipated. The plan was for the weapon to weaken you, then for the messengers to strike. Kill your avatar and make an example of the city."

"Where did the weapon come from?"

"Some group that has been giving us trouble for years. Energy vampires. Their powers are required to make their weapons work, but they have only used them on messengers, to my knowledge. They have never used them on a Voice of the Will, let alone a prime avatar before. No one knew what would happen, but while the means of the city's destruction was accidental, the destruction itself was not. The messengers would have razed it to the ground anyway. Slaughtered or enslaved the population."

Jason didn't respond, but his expression was answer enough.

"I know you will never overlook what has happened here," Jamis continued. "And I know what happens if you go to war against us in earnest, here on this planet. I think you see this hole where a city once stood, and you know it too. You attack our forces. Drain them for the power to use that bird form to resurrect your avatar. We escalate with high rankers in retaliation, creating a cycle of triggering your resurrection and you slaughtering us with it. Our search is slowed to a crawl as this planet is ravaged by our battles. We

astral kings are forced to intercede with our prime avatars which, in turn, allows the gods to act more directly. I don't know who wins all that, but I know who loses. The innocent people of this world as our war escalates until craters like this are scattered across it like sprinkles on a cake. That doesn't matter to me, but it matters to you."

"You want us to be friends?"

"I do. I hope that happens someday."

"It won't. Not until those people you don't care about start to matter. Earth has its share of monsters, but they are nothing next to you. Their atrocities last decades at worst. How long have yours gone on already? Centuries?"

"Millennia."

"I've made a lot of glib comments in my life about fighting evil. But you're it. The real thing. I think you're right in that you and I will know each other for a long time. And I'll be fighting you for all of it."

"I can live with that."

Jason scowled.

"You have a proposal. You said restitution."

"I did. I want to blunt your fury against us. Avoid the destruction I described. In short, to have you continue as you were instead of focusing your actions on us. This event will only reinforce those of us who understand the threat you pose. I want you to go about as you have been. Fight our messengers as they come across your path, but don't actively campaign against them. In return, I have been empowered by the council to offer you the withdrawal of a significant number of our occupying forces from areas around the globe. Every location in which we have completed our search operations but still hold territory, we will abandon. Immediately."

Jason rose in the air, his feet leaving the ground as he came eye to eye with Jamis.

"Your proposal is that you abandon the areas now useless to your larger goal. The ones controlled by those who, like the astral kings that attacked me, have lost focus? Freeing them up for you to reconcentrate your resources on your actual objectives?"

Jamis smiled.

"I should have been hoping you wouldn't realise that part, yet I find myself glad that you were not so easily deceived."

"You expect a counteroffer."

"I do. But it cannot be to give up and leave. I will not surrender this opportunity, even for you. We are enemies, today. But if I can settle some of your enmity over what has happened here, I will. I know the price will not be cheap, but greatness comes from the

resolve to pay the price others won't. You claim that we are not alike in this, but we both know what it is to push on when those around us falter and lose their resolve."

Jason stared at Jamis, his nebulous eyes burning.

"Abandon all the occupied territories?" he asked.

"Yes," Jamis said.

"That could be acceptable, but you don't get the messengers."

"What do you mean?"

"The messengers in those territories. You don't just get them to redeploy. They come to me. Their astral kings set them free of their marks and I take them."

"All of them?"

"All of them."

"That would require getting numerous kings to give up the entirety of their forces on this planet. What happened here already demonstrates that the Council of Kings is not absolute in its power. Even if it was, I can't sell this to them. I'm not a dictator, and controlling the council is a delicate affair. You understand that blunt solutions like this only cause trouble."

"Yes, but it's your politics. Your troubles. You want me to be an enemy and not a nemesis? Then you have to hurt for what your people have done here."

"The council will see it as handing an army to the Unorthodoxy."

"Killing and draining the life force from that many messengers would restore my power to use the ghost phoenix form. That is what was taken from me here."

"I have studied you closely, Jason Asano. You don't want these messengers to kill. You want to set them free."

"Has the rest of the Council of Kings studied me closely as well?"

Jamis blinked.

"No," he said. "No, they have not. And slaughtering quarter of a million messengers for personal power is exactly the kind of thinking that makes sense to them. Setting them free on moral principle is what they would find outlandish."

He turned from Jason to pace contemplatively. Jason noted that it was a very human behaviour, compared to the imperiousness of normal messenger body language.

"You would have to take them into your astral kingdom," Jamis reasoned. "And not let them out again, at least not here. And best not at all, until our operations on Pallimustus are done. And you couldn't use that time to turn your astral kingdom into an Unorthodoxy training camp. If you unleashed a quarter-million strong Unorthodoxy army on the cosmos, the full force of the council would come after us both. You aren't ready to endure that. Yet."

“I’m not looking to turn slaves into soldiers. Their choices will be their own, and some will want to join the Unorthodoxy. I will hold them until your people are done with this planet, but if they want to fight you when that time is over, I won’t stop them. But I have a little experience in this. Most messengers aren’t ready to escape the indoctrination. It will be hard on them. Confusing, rage inducing. Some will even want to go back to your side.”

“We wouldn’t take them.”

“I know, and that only frustrates them further. Again, I have no interest in creating soldiers. Not for the Unorthodoxy and not for the astral kings. I want to let them be innocent people. The kind that were killed and displaced here today. Anything else is for them to choose on their own.”

Jamis turned back to Jason who had again floated to the ground.

“I cannot promise anything,” he said. “I will do what I can.”