

## 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.

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"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.

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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.

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- 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.

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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.

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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.”

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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.”

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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.

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- 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.
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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.

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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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