

Chapter 918

A Time to Slumber

In the end, only one place had the space, resources and accessibility to immediately shelter and house a city worth of people on short notice. The brighthearts had once formed a massive queue to file into Jason's soul realm for shelter, and now the people of Boko did the same. Little explanation was given and little was needed; escape from the sun to a place of shelter and abundance was all most people needed to see.

Jason built a city in a desert for them to occupy. Another oasis city, reminiscent of the home they had lost. He'd been unsure about using that design, worried about causing fresh trauma, but ultimately decided that something familiar would be best. Putting them in a completely alien place would only unsettle them further.

Days after the citizens of Boko had been evacuated to the astral kingdom, the area around the crater was occupied by outsiders. Civic authorities from Boko, the Adventure Society and a dozen other organisations had people in the area. Some were investigators, others were cleaning up the temporary camps. Many seemed to have no purpose at all, but refused to be excluded from the goings on.

There was a new panic as portals once more appeared in the sky, high above the crater. These were even larger and more numerous than those used by the messenger army days earlier, and for good reason. Messengers poured out of them, far more than the invasion force, but they never came close to the people scrambling below.

On the ground, Jason was with his team and his team leader's mother. They were running a catering operation, pretending like they weren't waiting for the event that would kick a fresh hornet's nest. The people under the canvas sun shelter couldn't see what was happening, only the panic of those outside. Soon they were dropping everything and running.

Jason sighed, looking at the food that had been tossed aside on the ground. He figured something like this would happen, which is why he'd been running a sausage sizzle with cheap bread and bruscard sausages. The giant worm meat was plentiful in the area, and the first alien meat Jason had learned to cook.

Among the yelling and screaming, he calmly took off his apron and walked out to look up at the sky. His team moved to stand around him protectively, although no one was paying attention. The only threat was being bumped into by people who couldn't seem to agree on which way to run.

Jason extended his power and a humongous ring of white stone appeared in the air. Larger even than the portals spewing out a deluge of messengers, it was positioned between them and the ground. It flared to life with portal energy, a massive sheet of silver, gold and blue light. Jason had gritted teeth as he exerted his power. To maintain such a large portal, he was tapping into his astral gate, pushing the limits of what his avatar body could manage.

The people on the ground were unsure of what to do. The handful of adventurers on site would have no chance if they confronted the messengers and they knew it. Everyone else was just fleeing, running for skimmers or escaping through portals of their own.

“We should have warned people this would happen,” Humphrey said for the hundredth time in the last few days.

“We discussed this,” Danielle said. “For one, there was no certainty it would happen. More importantly, the Continental Council would want to insert themselves. Complicate matters that need to be kept simple. There is a time to act with caution and care, but also a time to be bold. As much as Jason needs to learn circumspection, the approach that comes more naturally to him has its place.”

The messengers didn't come near the ground. It was soon evident that they were disappearing into Jason's portal as suddenly as they appeared from their own. That didn't stop the panic below, but it gave the adventurers thinking they were about to die hope that the chaos above would leave them be.

“Jason,” Humphrey said. “Once it's over and people calm down, people will come looking. They watched the entire population of Boko troop through one of your soul realm portals, and it won't take them long to realise that's a giant-size version up there.”

Jason only nodded, still concentrating. Humphrey didn't bother him further, having discussed all this before. The plan was to leave Humphrey, Danielle and Farrah to deal with the immediate fallout.

“The interest in you will be bad enough right away,” Danielle said. “But once they realise where all those messengers decamped from, the real storm begins. Everyone is going to want answers. Everyone.”

Finally, the last of the messenger deluge vanished. The portals all disappeared, leaving an empty sky above and a confused crowd below. One of Jason's regular shadow portals opened beside him, and he led most of his team through. The last three stayed, as planned, and stepped back into the shade of the catering tent.

“Is Jason alright?” Humphrey asked. “He's still barely talking.”

“He’s not as fragile as he used to be,” Farrah said. “He hates what happened, that he couldn’t save everyone. Same as the rest of us.”

“The rest of us didn’t die,” Humphrey argued. “I know he cheated death — again — but he feels it, doesn’t he? When he’s dying?”

“He does, but it’s not the dying that bothers him. He’s used to it. Used to the pain. And he doesn’t blame himself for the casualties of the messenger attack, even though it was his power. He knows he wasn’t responsible. His problem is the killing he did on purpose. I have trouble looking at the messengers as anything but enemies, but he sees them as indoctrinated slaves. To his mind, he killed ten thousand victims.”

“I’m not sure how anyone is meant to move on from something like that,” Danielle said. “I’ve had extreme experiences as an adventurer, but what happened that day wasn’t adventuring. That was the wrath of an angry god.”

“And that’s how he deals with it,” Farrah said. “Part of him is beyond mortality, and he has to accept that part of himself to unleash the power that comes with it. The mindset of a god. His mind while he was in his phoenix form was much like when he fought Undeath’s avatar in the transformation zone. He’s better at holding himself together, but there’s a detachment that helps him.”

“You seem confident in your insights,” Danielle said.

Farrah tapped her forehead.

“It’s the bond we share,” she said. “I can feel what he’s feeling. I could feel it when he was the phoenix, and I can feel it now. He can hide his emotions from me if he wants, but he’s not doing that. He wants me to know he’s not spiralling. He hates what happened, but he knows that it had to be done. That if he hadn’t killed the messengers, it would have been a fight that the adventurers of Boko weren’t ready for. It would have been ugly, and we probably would have lost.”

“That’s certainly true,” Danielle said. “But even if he’s come to terms with what happened, others haven’t. The power he showed that day already has people on edge, and this will only make it worse. Messenger strongholds across the entire planet just depopulated. Everyone will want to know to why, whether they’re coming back and what Jason intends to do with them. Very understandable questions that I’d quite like to see answered myself.”

“He said that they won’t be anyone else’s concern now,” Humphrey said. “That they won’t be coming back. For now, we trust his word, and the details will come later.”

“I know. But he needs to be stable right now. How he handles the Adventure Society and other authorities over the next few days will define those relationships into the foreseeable future.”

“How widely do people know he was the big magic bird?” Farrah asked. “Is his name being thrown around by people in general?”

“Not from what Stella and Lindy could tell,” Humphrey said. “I’ve had them keeping ears and eyes out for trouble. The Boko population, and even most of the people here now aren’t talking about Jason by name. They’re talking about the Hegemon as some mysterious figure, and erroneous rumours are already circulating.”

“The Adventure Society officials and anyone relatively well informed know, of course,” Danielle said. “That the Hegemon was Jason isn’t a secret, exactly, but Jason’s name wasn’t in those system messages, and the Adventure Society isn’t making any announcements. They seem happy to not point out how much power belongs to one gold ranker. If he was diamond, that’s one thing, but this breaks the understood power hierarchy, even if it’s a contingent event. For now, the society seems happier to let the Hegemon be a strange and powerful mystery.”

“Speaking of which,” Farrah said, nodding her head at an approaching group. “I think we’re about to be asked some pointed questions.”

Jamis Fran Muskar’s dimensional ship looked out of place on Pallimustus. The sleek, sweeping lines were more akin to a spaceship than anything else in a world of wizards and dragons. It floated over an expanse of lawn that had belonged to a local lord before the messengers conquered the region.

Jamis was preparing to take the ship and leave Pallimustus when a Voice of the Will approached. The messenger landed and immediately dropped to one knee. The image of her astral king appeared above her.

“Many question your actions, Jamis Fran Muskar. It is unlike you to be so overt. Your influence has been damaged by this.”

“Is that so, Astrid Ela Dain? Then why have you been supporting me? You saved me several complications in pushing the lesser kings to surrender their forces.”

“I see where this road ends. When you have your grand kingdom, just remember who helped you claim it.”

“I always remember those of good foresight and sound judgement.”

“So long as you maintain yours. The lesser kings fear you, but they have always feared you. Now they question you behind your back. Your enemies on the council are already looking to make use of them.”

Jamis smiled.

“Let things rest for the moment. Remain neutral, and don’t push back on my behalf.”

“Why not? Disrespect leads to ambition and betrayal. This is a tumour that needs to be cut out before it spreads.”

“There is a time to slumber in the depths of the lake. To let the weak and the foolish frolic on the shores, telling themselves it belongs to them. And then there is a time to rise from the lake, and remind the world why those waters are best left undisturbed.”

“You want your enemies to gather. To feel emboldened. You’re waiting for the snake to rear before you cut off its head.”

“Exposing an artificial weakness is always a risk. Authenticity is always best, and since I needed to expend some of my influence, this makes a good opportunity. Our losses today are the seeds of tomorrow’s gain. And I thank you, Astrid Ela Dain, for your support in minimising those losses.”

“Is he worth it, this man? Our success here is a break point for your plan.”

“There is little loss in angering those who have become distracted, like Vesta Carmis Zell. It sends a message to the others about maintaining focus. And yes, it is worth not setting this man on a vendetta against us.”

“Help me understand, Mr Asano—”

“I’ve already explained the events in question, Mr Billings. Several times. At this stage, your lack of comprehension is your failure, not mine.”

In Greenstone Adventure Society conference room, Jason was allowing himself to be debriefed by an investigator from the Continental Council. On the investigator’s side of the table was a small crowd of assistants and notetakers. On Jason’s side he had only himself and Danielle Geller.

“The issue, Mr Asano, is that I don’t see why the closest thing the messengers have to a supreme leader would see you as a sufficient threat to make the concessions that they have.”

Jason’s gaze fixed on the man across the table like a rifle scope.

“That sounds like you’re accusing me of being a liar, Mr Billings. You can phrase it as a speculative question all you like, but I will remind you that I am here as a courtesy. If

what you are looking for is discourtesy, I find myself increasingly enthused to accommodate you.”

Danielle placed a gentle restraining touch on his forearm.

“Mr Asano has made himself very clear as to what transpired,” she said. “His role here is to tell you what happened, Mr Billings. He has done so multiple times, in deference to your requests for clarification. It’s not going to get any clearer, and I think we’ve reached the end of what this meeting can productively achieve.”

“Forgive me, Lady Geller, but the events as described simply do not make sense.”

“That’s because you refuse to look at them through any lens but your own power paradigm,” Jason said. “I’m not a gold ranker when I’m negotiating with the Builder or the gods or the leader of the messengers. I can’t afford to be that small.”

“Nor when you are fighting an army alone, it would seem. We have a record of your essence abilities, Mr Asano, but there is a question of where your other capabilities come from. What is the source of the power you displayed in Boko?”

“Spinach.”

“We are done here,” Danielle announced. She rose from her chair and placed a hand on Jason’s shoulder. He glanced up at her, nodded and likewise stood up.

“Mr Billings,” he said, giving the man a nod, then followed Danielle out of the room.

As soon as they were in the hall, she tapped a brooch to activate a privacy screen.

“I know you don’t want to do this,” she told him. “Putting up with it now, however, will make things easier with the Adventure Society down the line.”

“I don’t think it will help if I start murdering their executives.”

“You did well,” she said.

“I was getting stropky at the end.”

“But you managed to keep your aura restrained.”

“I’m not going to lose control of it.”

“I’m not worried about what you’ll do with it by accident. I’m worried about what you’ll do on purpose.”

“Billings is a gold ranker, and he might use cores, but his aura training is obviously thorough.”

“That’s my concern. If you thought he could take it, you might be inclined to show him what he was failing to learn by listening.”

“I’m not unstable, Danielle, just frustrated. And what I need isn’t to take out those frustrations on some bureaucrat.”

“Then, what do you need?”