

## 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.”