

Chapter 921

A Framework For Leadership

Jason's cloud ship sailed north from Greenstone. He stood on the top deck, leaning on the rail as the fresh ocean wind washed over him. Nik stood beside him, only the head and shoulders of the diminutive rabbit man reaching above the railing.

"How was it, being back in Greenstone?" Jason asked him. "You kind of vanished on arrival, and we didn't see you much. I didn't even see you at the festival."

"It was strange," Nik said. "I lived there for longer than you did, when I was training. But so many of the people I knew are gone, or older. It was like the world was passing me by while I was stuck in place."

"That's how it's going to be, sometimes. Especially in places like Greenstone, where even the adventurers are mostly low rank. People will get old, live out their lives. It's places like Vitesse and Rimaros that have more people who age slowly or not at all."

"You spend a lot of time around powerful people, don't you?"

"Yeah."

"Are you worried about losing touch with regular people? Growing apart from them as everyone you know stays the same, decade after decade?"

"I am," Jason said. "That's one of the reasons I went back to Greenstone. Meeting people I knew back then was nice. When you're an adventurer, you are often meeting people on the worst day of their life. I went to a village I last saw as rubble. People are happily living their lives, now. It was twenty years ago, so only the older people remember what happened as anything but a story. There's a man there who, back then, told me about his hopes for his granddaughter. This time, he told me about how those hopes had been fulfilled. It's good to remember what we fight for."

"But we aren't a part of their world anymore, are we?"

"No. It's important that we visit, to remind ourselves what it's all about, but we don't belong there. We have our own community to be a part of. Vitesse should be a good place for that."

"Yeah, it's a nice city."

"Wait, even you've been there? I've been trying to get to Vitesse for twenty years. I didn't even know."

"Dad, you created me out of thin air like you were starting your own bible, sent me to violence boarding school and then vanished for a decade and a half. With parenting skills like those, are you really surprised you missed a few things?"

Jason winced.

“I haven’t done as well by you as I would have liked. I can’t make more of your kind, turn you into a species proper, until I reach the fullness of my power. But we’ll be on Earth soon. You don’t know them, but you have family there.”

“Do they know about me?”

“I told my sister, and my grandmother. It’s kind of hard to explain that you made your own universe and created a guy. That has connotations, back on Earth. You know, I could try making a female lehenik. Can I get one of your ribs, real quick?”

“Don’t be a tool, Dad. Also, trying to make a woman for your son is creepy. You’re not leaving her a lot of room for agency, there. Also, she’d be my sister. And my clone, maybe? Yeah, I don’t think creepy really encapsulates how gross that is.”

“Okay, that was a bad idea. In fairness, another guy did it first. I didn’t love his book, but there’s not a lot of reference material for this stuff.”

“See, this is why I didn’t introduce you to my friends in Greenstone. They all think you’re this awesome adventurer, and I don’t want to ruin it for them.”

A grin crept across Jason’s face.

“Your friends think I’m cool?”

“Calm down, Dad. I didn’t say cool. No one said cool.”

“You said awesome. That’s like the better version of cool.”

“No, that just means things explode around you a lot.”

“How is that not cool?”

Jason laughed as Nik shook his head. The smile slid off Jason’s face, replaced with a contemplative expression.

“I don’t know what I’m doing most of the time,” he admitted. “I meant it when I said that I want to do better by you. I hope you’ll give me some time to figure that out. Trying to explain you — and me for that matter — to our family back on Earth. I don’t think it’s going to work until we’re there. Emi is not going to stop hugging you for the first week.”

“I’m not a stuffed toy.”

Jason put a hand on his shoulder.

“I know, buddy. Sometimes there are things about ourselves we just have to live with. There are worse things than being crazy adorable.”

Nik looked up awkwardly at Jason.

“You know,” he said hesitantly. “You could hug me. If you wanted.”

Jason looked down at him with a warm smile, then dropped to one knee and gathered him into a hug.

Boko had been a coastal city. When the section of crater closest to the ocean had collapsed, the water spilling had turned it into a harbour. An inlet led into what could have been a lagoon if it wasn't so large and deep. Islands dotting the water were once temples, shielded from the city's destruction by their gods.

The cloud ship was anchored offshore from the inlet. The shores of the new harbour were swarmed with essence users and ritual magicians. They were working to stabilise the area, making it safe and ready for a new city to be constructed.

A skimmer set out from the cloud ship, passing over the water of the inlet and entering the harbour. Jason and Danielle rode in black and dark grey shades of luxury as the vehicle steered itself.

"Boko was never the port city that Greenstone is," Danielle said. "Neither had a natural harbour, which is part of why Greenstone's artificial island was constructed."

"I don't like being back here," Jason said. "It reminds me of what can happen if I lose control."

"You didn't lose control. You were attacked."

"I know. But what we know and what we feel can be very different things."

"Yes," Danielle agreed. "They can."

"It doesn't help that we have this last bit of unpleasant business on the way out of the region. We've been here for well over a month now, and the idea was to stay for a week. I'm thinking that we put aside the sightseeing and make a beeline for Estercost. Round up as many Earthlings as we can and maybe just portal straight to Rimaros. I've got forever to sightsee later."

"I think the group will be open to that. You're the only one who has never seen Estercost. Why Rimaros for the bridge to Earth, though?"

"It's not Rimaros itself we're going for. I don't know what kind of side effects may come from completing this dimensional bridge. I was advised to anchor it somewhere remote, and the people that were sucked through from the other end demonstrated the value of that advice. There's an uninhabited island in the Storm Kingdom. The Builder installed astral magic infrastructure there to ensure I arrived at that location. It's already attuned to the link between worlds and it's robust enough to meet our needs."

"Why did the Builder want you to land in Rimaros?"

"The Builder's prime vessel overstepped. The Builder was forced into limiting who he would send to kill me. He made another deal with Disguise, who everyone still thought was Purity, to try and get around the first agreement. Sophie's mother was one of fake Purity's

brainwashed lackeys and the idea was to use her to use Sophie to lure me into a trap and kill me.”

“That sounds so convoluted that I can’t believe anyone thought it would work.”

“I know, right? I think the Builder was transitioning prime vessels at the time. He didn’t have his regular guy to do his mortal-level thinking for him. In fairness, it did almost work. Only because Princess Liara realised the Builder was after me and used me as bait, though.”

“She used you as bait?”

“She bailed me out, in the end. I did force her hand a little, but I’m pretty sure she would have done it anyway. Eventually. But Melody’s interest in me was peripheral. Once the god let Melody’s daughter matter to her through the brainwashing, she became obsessed with getting Sophie back. Carlos and Arabelle think that’s a cognitive key they can use to smooth the mental strain of purging her condition.”

“When will you be doing that?”

“Whenever Carlos and Melody are ready. Probably in the next few days. But the point is, the Builder had some serious dimensional magic infrastructure put in place on the island. Farrah and Clive think we can use it as a foundation to anchor the dimensional bridge.”

“They want to use something the Builder left behind?”

“They think it’s safe. And who would you get in for a second opinion?”

“That’s true. We should check in with the Adventure Society contingent here.”

“Good idea. No point having them interrupt us if we can avoid it.”

The skimmer turned towards a group of stone-shaped buildings on the shore.

Jason had avoided naming the city in his astral kingdom after Boko. Given its nature as an oasis, he decided to name it New Water. In the city’s administrative centre, the Duke of Boko was holding a management meeting.

“Over the next week, I will be finalising departments and assigning sub-management roles to...”

He trailed off as a portal opened in the room and Jason stepped out.

“Lord Asano,” the duke said in greeting.

“Still not a lord, Duke Boko,” Jason replied, his tone curt. “Come with me.”

Jason went back through the portal without checking if the duke would follow. The Duke didn’t hesitate, not even pausing to instruct his subordinates.

“Do you think I’m meant to follow?” the Duke’s assistant asked, then the portal closed.

“I suppose not,” she said.

Of the various factions involved in studying the aftermath and preparing for the next step, the officials from the Boko government were the largest contingent. They were mostly senior executives from the old Boko government, along with an administrative staff and a team of experts from various departments. Their mandate was to assess the viability of reconstruction and begin preliminary planning. When the Duke emerged from a portal in the middle of their camp, they swarmed him, firing off questions.

“Please,” the duke said, holding up his hands for calm. “I know that there is a lot you want my input on, and I know that you have not had access to me while I have been in New Water. That city must be the priority now, and my focus must be leading our people as they settle into a new home. Anything you feel you need me to decide, simply use your best judgement. Now, if you’ll excuse me, Lord Asano and I have matters of import to discuss. Perhaps a walk along the shore as the sun sets, Lord Asano.”

The duke immediately started walking off towards the shoreline, leaving an array of confused and frustrated people behind. Jason watched the display with a frown, then moved to the leader of the government contingent.

“Some people are coming to get things organised,” Jason quietly promised. “For now, let your people take a break. Let them go see their families.”

A wide portal arch rose from the floor.

“That will take you to a public square in the main residential district. I’ll leave it open for the moment, so your people can come and go.”

“Thank you, Lord Asano.”

“I’m not a lord. You can call me Mr Asano or, even better, Jason.”

“Thank you, Mr Asano.”

Jason nodded and followed the duke who was slowly strolling along a path by the shore. Remnants of ritual magic and stone shaping marked the embankment, along with hardy desert spear grass that had been planted to stabilise the slope. It was late in the day and the sun dipped close to the ocean, soon to drop out of sight.

“What can I do for you, Lord Asano?” the duke asked as Jason caught up to his meandering pace and matched it.

The duke was a silver-ranker, courtesy of monster cores, which was the norm for political leaders. He was a dark-skinned human, typical for Boko’s population, with long

hair bound into thick strands by ornate gold clasps. His physique was essence-user lean, but there was a softness in how he carried himself. He had none of the sharp energy of an adventurer, always watching for threats.

“Duke Boko, I told you that you can ask me to connect you to your people here at any time. You have, thus far, only availed yourself of this twice. The last time was almost two weeks ago.”

“Matters in New Water warrant my attention. The vast majority of my people are there. Not only do I have to plan for their wellbeing, but I must also look ahead as the first city leader on an entirely new world. Your astral kingdom—”

“Duke Boko,” Jason cut him off.

“Lord Asano, you may call me Kalar.”

“I call you Duke Boko because that is both who and what you are.”

“Actually, I was thinking that people should start calling me—”

“You are not Duke New Water. You are Duke Boko, and that...”

He pointed at the water.

“...is Boko. That is what you rule. The full extent of what you rule. Your attention, Duke, should be here. This is a tragedy, but also an opportunity. To build a city from nothing. To plan out that which, before, grew up in a tangle over centuries. To make use of a harbour you never had before. To heal the wounds of what happened here, both in the hearts of the people and in the entire regional economy.”

Jason stopped, turning to look out over the water.

“This time is critical, Duke Boko. I know this is hard, no doubt harder than I can understand, not being in your position. But you need to remember where you are from instead of looking to make something new. You need to concern yourself with your people, not your desire to be the first ruler on a new world.”

“My lord Asano, I—”

“I know everything that happens in my astral kingdom, Duke. Every word you say. Every ambition you whisper to your pet songbird. Privacy screens don’t hide you from me.”

“Lord Asano, New Water is a city inhabited only by my people. They trust me. Respect me. You need a steady hand in these times of turbulence.”

“On that, we agree.”

“We do?” the duke asked, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Jason pointed out at the water where three dark skimmers were approaching the shore from the direction of the temple islands. It was hard to spot them under the darkening sky. They moved onto the land and settled into the grass.

The people disembarking all wore the garb of clergy. The first group had robes of crimson with gold trim. Their sigil was a hand gripping a planet, the symbol of Dominion. The next group had plain robes of undyed linen, followed by a group wearing muted blue.

“Thank you all for coming,” Jason said. “If you follow the path back that way, you’ll find the portal amongst those stone-shaped buildings.”

He turned back to the duke, who was staring in confusion.

“I have asked some of the gods to help me assess and manage the situation in New Water,” Jason explained. “Dominion will help me construct a framework for leadership. I have given them general parameters for a governance framework. Beyond that, they will be consulting with the new residents as to how best to lead the populace and administer the city. The final say is mine, of course, but I think the people who live there should have a voice in how it should be run.”

“But—”

“The priests of Hearth and of Refuge will be organising the people. Who wants to settle permanently, who wants to find a new home, and who wants to wait for the reconstruction of Boko.”

“I know the archbishops for all of those churches. I can—”

“I didn’t ask the archbishops, Duke. I asked their gods. I also asked Dominion to take a look at how you’re managing the affairs of your fallen city. As your city state is now underwater, there is some question as to whether you will continue to enjoy his endorsement. My recommendation is that you go back to your people and work very hard to demonstrate your value in leading them.”

The Duke stared at Jason.

“Why are you doing this to me? You *can’t* do this to me!”

“Duke, you and your people have been through a lot, so I am doing my best to be gentle. But I say again that I know everything you have done while in my kingdom, and you have butted against the limits of my gentility. You will never enter New Water again.”

“The noble houses won’t stand for that.”

“The noble houses of Boko are free to leave. New Water has no aristocracy, which is one of my parameters for the Dominion priests to work with. Anyone who stays will not have any noble title recognised.”

“They won’t tolerate those conditions.”

“I have neither the time nor the interest to listen to you go through the denial stage, Duke Boko. I’m going to pick up my friend from the Adventure Society camp and leave. I

imagine we will meet again, to discuss matters regarding the population. I hope you give matters some clearheaded consideration before that time.”

Jason headed for the closest skimmer as the other two dissolved into clouds of darkness that vanished into his shadow. The skimmer took off as the sun set on the still water that was once the city of Boko.