

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.

System Alert: Sacred Phoenix

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

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.

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.

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.

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."

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.