

Chapter 917

Eternity Awaits Us

“I’ve been looking forward to meeting you, Jason Asano.”

Jason’s feet lifted off the ground as he floated forward, coming eye to eye with the much taller man. His friends watched warily from behind.

“Why are you here?”

“These are not the circumstances under which I hoped we would meet. I am here to apologise. I won’t pretend that the people who died here matter to me. That I care about the homes they’ve lost or the impact this will have on their entire lives. But those things matter to you, and *that* matters to me.”

“If you think an empty apology will make me less angry instead of more, you have made a dire miscalculation.”

“I do not intend it to be empty, but we can discuss that in a moment. You and I will know each other for longer than time can measure. This first meeting is no small thing, and I would like to do it properly. When I said these are not the circumstances I hoped for, that was not just a glib line.”

Jason stared at the messenger for a long time.

“Who are you, Jamis Fran Muskar?”

“I am a member of the Council of Kings, as you have most likely guessed. Some consider me the leader of it, although it has no such thing.”

“Why do I get the feeling that it does?”

A flicker of a smile teased the messenger’s lips for just a moment.

“A first amongst equals, perhaps. Do not expect me to repeat that in other company, however. Sometimes, to lead means standing behind. You are just beginning your political education, but I have no doubt that time will see you master the nuances.”

“You know me.”

“You first came to my attention during your conflict with Vesta Carmis Zell, whose influence has sharply diminished after her failures here. Pursuing her own objectives while the rest of us moved with shared purpose was a dangerous move for her, politically. Failing was disastrous. She was never the most influential member of the council, and now even her position on it is in danger.”

“Will she be back?”

“No. Her objective was lost to you, and to join the larger cause now would look like crawling back. She needs to cut her losses and rebuild her power base with other endeavours.”

“Then I don’t care.”

“No? In time, she will come at you again.”

“Let her.”

A smile twitched on Jamis’ lips again.

“Good,” he said. “Dwelling on defeated enemies is not the way of one who stands at the pinnacle. It is the attitude that an original should have. Do you know much about the originals?”

“No.”

“I know this is far from an opportune time, but would you like to?”

Jason frowned. He glanced back at his companions, their expressions all saying no. Even Clive, information hungry as he was.

“It’s fine,” he told them, then turned back to Jamis. “Let’s take a walk.”

He drifted to the ground and set off, across the curved base of the massive hole. He walked through the space where the mountain of messenger corpses had been, but no trace of them remained. Every scrap and stain had dissolved into rainbow smoke. The crater was barely curved at the bottom, being the size of a city. It was barren and smooth, sealed by the power that hollowed it out.

“The originals are like you,” Jamis said. “Those who were not messengers yet became astral kings anyway, except they were never just astral kings. You, the astral nexus, blend elements of gods, astral kings, and great astral beings. The astral colossus has a prime avatar larger than most planets. He spends his time drifting through the void of various universes for reasons I could never determine. The astral beast has no prime avatar, as you and I would understand it. He possesses armies of living creatures, spawned from his astral kingdom.”

“You’re not an original. You’re a normal astral king.”

“To my envy, I am not of your kind. I told the fools who attacked you that they were not like you and I, but the truth is, I am closer to them than you. Messengers and astral kings are obsessed with superiority, but the truth is, you stand above us all. We tell ourselves differently, but those of us who remember the originals know. Even the name we changed. You were called originators, at first, but it didn’t fit with the myths we built around ourselves.”

“Originators. The originals were the origin of the messengers?”

“Yes. We were your messengers. But, over time, the originators retreated into obscurity. More rose, from time to time, but few are like you, Jason Asano. Left to our own devices, we started telling ourselves stories. That we were the prime species of the cosmos, messengers of the cosmic will. Our originators became the originals, not our makers but merely the first of us.”

“But you know all this.”

“We are immortal. Records are almost as easy to find as wilful ignorance, and I am a student of our history. And we do encounter them, from time to time. Stumble into whatever interest they’re pursuing. Sometimes we even fight them, as we are fighting you here. Most are older than us. Your youth is part of what makes you such a contentious figure for us.”

“Why are you telling me all this?”

“My interest here is in the future. You and I will still know each other when this planet has been swallowed by its sun. Our relationship will be so much more than this world. This war. I want you to understand what you are, and what we are. That there are those, like me, who understand that the originals are more than just astral kings. That you stand above us.”

“Most of your kind don’t see it that way.”

“But they feel it. That is why their reaction to you is so polarised. You trigger an instinct within us, to fight you or obey you, because you make us want to kneel.”

“But not enough that I can make you leave this planet.”

“Instincts can be overcome.”

“Why do you need this? What makes the Purity artefact so precious you would spend lives by the tens of thousands to obtain it?”

“Because of you. The originals. You can come from every species except the messengers, and I want to change that. To be like you. More than just an astral king. But that is not something one can become from simple desire. It takes the right circumstance, the right opportunity, and this relic is the beginning of that for me.”

“You want to be an original.”

“Yes. You are each unique. All of you reached that point in different ways, and I would do so as well. But to snatch that chance, it takes a resolve that never wavers. Whatever the damage, whatever the cost, you must seize the opportunity when it appears. You are one of the few who truly understand this.”

“Then you know me less well than you think. I don’t do what I do for power. That came as a consequence of fighting for the things you dismiss. The price of your power. To

you, the lives of innocent people are a cost. To me, they are the entire point. I am not an astral king first, or an original. I'm an adventurer."

He moved in front of Jamis, staring up at him.

"And adventurers stand between innocent people and things like you."

"Yes. I know that what has happened here will only further poison you against us. My hope is to ameliorate that damage. You and I are enemies, today, but eternity awaits us. I hope that one day, you and I can be friends. Amongst my kind, such sentiment is considered a warning sign of Unorthodoxy sympathising."

"I am going to burn down your entire civilisation. Do you think we can be friends after that?"

"I do. Perhaps we can even change things together, but that is for another day. On this one, I have come to make an apology. Not an empty one, although I know there can be no true restitution for what my people have done here. Turning the power you use to protect into the weapon that killed a city. It was not the council's intention, for what little that is worth. The council's directive to not target you was explicit, but those instructions were defied. The plan to attack you was not sanctioned."

"What was the plan? Use the weapon to kill me and the city, then occupy the rubble with their army?"

"The interaction of your power with the weapon was unanticipated. The plan was for the weapon to weaken you, then for the messengers to strike. Kill your avatar and make an example of the city."

"Where did the weapon come from?"

"Some group that has been giving us trouble for years. Energy vampires. Their powers are required to make their weapons work, but they have only used them on messengers, to my knowledge. They have never used them on a Voice of the Will, let alone a prime avatar before. No one knew what would happen, but while the means of the city's destruction was accidental, the destruction itself was not. The messengers would have razed it to the ground anyway. Slaughtered or enslaved the population."

Jason didn't respond, but his expression was answer enough.

"I know you will never overlook what has happened here," Jamis continued. "And I know what happens if you go to war against us in earnest, here on this planet. I think you see this hole where a city once stood, and you know it too. You attack our forces. Drain them for the power to use that bird form to resurrect your avatar. We escalate with high rankers in retaliation, creating a cycle of triggering your resurrection and you slaughtering us with it. Our search is slowed to a crawl as this planet is ravaged by our battles. We

astral kings are forced to intercede with our prime avatars which, in turn, allows the gods to act more directly. I don't know who wins all that, but I know who loses. The innocent people of this world as our war escalates until craters like this are scattered across it like sprinkles on a cake. That doesn't matter to me, but it matters to you."

"You want us to be friends?"

"I do. I hope that happens someday."

"It won't. Not until those people you don't care about start to matter. Earth has its share of monsters, but they are nothing next to you. Their atrocities last decades at worst. How long have yours gone on already? Centuries?"

"Millennia."

"I've made a lot of glib comments in my life about fighting evil. But you're it. The real thing. I think you're right in that you and I will know each other for a long time. And I'll be fighting you for all of it."

"I can live with that."

Jason scowled.

"You have a proposal. You said restitution."

"I did. I want to blunt your fury against us. Avoid the destruction I described. In short, to have you continue as you were instead of focusing your actions on us. This event will only reinforce those of us who understand the threat you pose. I want you to go about as you have been. Fight our messengers as they come across your path, but don't actively campaign against them. In return, I have been empowered by the council to offer you the withdrawal of a significant number of our occupying forces from areas around the globe. Every location in which we have completed our search operations but still hold territory, we will abandon. Immediately."

Jason rose in the air, his feet leaving the ground as he came eye to eye with Jamis.

"Your proposal is that you abandon the areas now useless to your larger goal. The ones controlled by those who, like the astral kings that attacked me, have lost focus? Freeing them up for you to reconcentrate your resources on your actual objectives?"

Jamis smiled.

"I should have been hoping you wouldn't realise that part, yet I find myself glad that you were not so easily deceived."

"You expect a counteroffer."

"I do. But it cannot be to give up and leave. I will not surrender this opportunity, even for you. We are enemies, today. But if I can settle some of your enmity over what has happened here, I will. I know the price will not be cheap, but greatness comes from the

resolve to pay the price others won't. You claim that we are not alike in this, but we both know what it is to push on when those around us falter and lose their resolve."

Jason stared at Jamis, his nebulous eyes burning.

"Abandon all the occupied territories?" he asked.

"Yes," Jamis said.

"That could be acceptable, but you don't get the messengers."

"What do you mean?"

"The messengers in those territories. You don't just get them to redeploy. They come to me. Their astral kings set them free of their marks and I take them."

"All of them?"

"All of them."

"That would require getting numerous kings to give up the entirety of their forces on this planet. What happened here already demonstrates that the Council of Kings is not absolute in its power. Even if it was, I can't sell this to them. I'm not a dictator, and controlling the council is a delicate affair. You understand that blunt solutions like this only cause trouble."

"Yes, but it's your politics. Your troubles. You want me to be an enemy and not a nemesis? Then you have to hurt for what your people have done here."

"The council will see it as handing an army to the Unorthodoxy."

"Killing and draining the life force from that many messengers would restore my power to use the ghost phoenix form. That is what was taken from me here."

"I have studied you closely, Jason Asano. You don't want these messengers to kill. You want to set them free."

"Has the rest of the Council of Kings studied me closely as well?"

Jamis blinked.

"No," he said. "No, they have not. And slaughtering quarter of a million messengers for personal power is exactly the kind of thinking that makes sense to them. Setting them free on moral principle is what they would find outlandish."

He turned from Jason to pace contemplatively. Jason noted that it was a very human behaviour, compared to the imperiousness of normal messenger body language.

"You would have to take them into your astral kingdom," Jamis reasoned. "And not let them out again, at least not here. And best not at all, until our operations on Pallimustus are done. And you couldn't use that time to turn your astral kingdom into an Unorthodoxy training camp. If you unleashed a quarter-million strong Unorthodoxy army on the cosmos, the full force of the council would come after us both. You aren't ready to endure that. Yet."

“I’m not looking to turn slaves into soldiers. Their choices will be their own, and some will want to join the Unorthodoxy. I will hold them until your people are done with this planet, but if they want to fight you when that time is over, I won’t stop them. But I have a little experience in this. Most messengers aren’t ready to escape the indoctrination. It will be hard on them. Confusing, rage inducing. Some will even want to go back to your side.”

“We wouldn’t take them.”

“I know, and that only frustrates them further. Again, I have no interest in creating soldiers. Not for the Unorthodoxy and not for the astral kings. I want to let them be innocent people. The kind that were killed and displaced here today. Anything else is for them to choose on their own.”

Jamis turned back to Jason who had again floated to the ground.

“I cannot promise anything,” he said. “I will do what I can.”