

Chapter 930

I Don't Blow Up Cities on Purpose

Cyrion was the capital of Estercost, and encompassed far more than the urban centre at its heart. A series of concentric walls ringed the city proper, with vast spans of agricultural land in between. Home to some of the most magical and valuable growing land on the planet, it was accordingly under impressive protection.

The messengers had, to date, made no attempts to invade Cyrion, focusing their efforts elsewhere. In the days before the messengers invaded Pallimustus, the Builder had not been so reticent. His cult had committed an unprecedented force to attacking the city, the remnants of which still lay beyond the outermost wall.

The Builder's world engineer golems rivalled any diamond-rank monster for size. Almost two decades after their demise, their toppled and overgrown forms looked more like hills than engines of war.

Jason and his friends looked down on the fallen golems from an observation lounge on the underside of the cloud ship. The hull was completely transparent from the inside, allowing unrestricted views of the landscape. It did lead to an odd effect where the furniture seemed to be floating in the air.

"We managed to stop those things from activating in the Reaper's astral space," Neil said. "I can't imagine actually fighting them."

"We were bronze rank," Humphrey pointed out. "It would be different now."

"Not that different," Clive said. "These golems are realms beyond anything we can create on this world. Actual, diamond-rank constructs. Even the diamond-rankers on our side wouldn't have been enough without the city defences."

"He's right," Danielle said. "In the entire history of Cyrion, the battle that left those things here was the only instance of even the outer wall being breached. Those golems made it past three layers of defence."

"Why did they leave them there instead of clearing them away?" Neil asked. "Surely the salvage would be worthwhile, being cosmic super golems."

"Even dormant, they were dangerous to approach," Danielle said. "They were sealed off and left behind while the city focused on repairing the walls, in case the messengers tried to take advantage of the damage. Those inside the walls were cleared out, but the ones outside were left where they fell. They were sealed off, to keep the bold and curious from danger. Only years later were the areas around them unsealed and swept for lingering dangers."

“I hope they got it all out before leaving them to grow over,” Neil said.

“They did,” Belinda said. “Clive and I had a discreet poke around a couple of years ago. Got some good base material if we ever want to knock out some constructs of our own, but all the fun stuff was gone.”

Jason looked through the hull in the direction of the wall.

“We’re approaching the defence perimeter,” he said. “There’s a city official on his way here in a small vessel. Come on, Miguel.”

Miguel Ladiv and the bartender, Jamar, were standing on the translucent floor, wobbling as if they had vertigo.

“What?” Miguel asked, looking up. “Right, sorry.”

He headed for Jason with the delicate walk of someone afraid the ice would crack under their feet.

“You’re not going to fall through, Miguel,” Jason told him.

“Uh huh,” Miguel said, and kept going as he was.

Even discounting the agricultural sectors, Cyrion was the largest city in the world. Even flying over it, it stretched out to the horizon in every direction. Few cities on Pallimustus had the sheer scope of Earth’s major cities, but from the air, Cyrion looked like Tokyo by way of the Emerald City of Oz. Grand towers shone in the sun. Massive lakes and whole forests fell within the urban sprawl. The sky was filled with air traffic, from small personal vehicles to massive airships the size of Jason’s and larger.

Shade was piloting the airship, but a city official was standing next to him on the bridge, guiding him along a very precise path. Even cloud ships were common enough in the city that it was fully prepared to accommodate them. They flew to one of the lakes where they were given space to convert the ship into a floating cloud palace.

Jason’s plans for his time in Cyrion didn’t involve sightseeing, the way they had in Vitesse. It was time to get serious about the return to Earth. During their travels, Jason had been studying more than a decade of work from Clive on restoring the bridge between Pallimustus and Earth. Once the expatriate earthlings were collected, they would be ready to head for Rimaros and the final stage.

In preparation for trying to collect the scattered Earth refugees, Jason had been working on his control over the System. The plan was to send out a message that would only reach the earthlings, calling them back to Cyrion. They had all started there, and most remained, making it the logical gathering spot.

For the first few days in Cyron, Jason holed himself up in his cloud palace on the lake. Meditating for hours on end, he refined his control over the System with Li Li Mei as a test subject. Messaging her as an earthling proved much harder than targeting her as a specific individual. It took several days of practise before he was ready to take things wider, and those days were mercifully peaceful. Cyron was one of the few places where a cloud ship full of gold rankers could arrive without it being a major event.

While Jason was practising, his team were hunting earthlings by more conventional means. Danielle went to the Geller compound in the city where she herself had gathered them following their arrival. That had been for their protection, given that dozens of outworlders make an enticing study opportunity. Both legitimate and less ethical researchers were eager to get their hands on such a large sample.

Once it was clear that Jason wouldn't be coming to handle them, the outworlders had to be allowed out of protective custody. Many had the misfortune of discovering why they'd been in it in the first place, winding up on the table of some sketchy researcher. The Adventure Society ended up retrieving many of them, many traumatised and some dead.

That was the thread Humphrey pulled on, looking into the Earth people through Adventure Society records. As the rescued ended up in the hands of the Healer's church, Neil pursued that avenue. Estella took the approach of looking for rumours and stories in the city. Many were tragedies, tales of exploitation and experimentation. Most, however, were almost startling mundane. The earthlings were mid-rank core users in a large city, and met the same fate as locals in that position: being hired by noble houses.

Being a guard for a noble house was a role that became increasingly odd the more prominent the family. The most prominent members of such houses were usually adventurers, whether active, retired or semi-retired. Anyone capable enough to protect such people were too powerful and important in their own right to be a servant.

Most house guards were failed adventurers, and were treated as such. They served as thugs for family interests or security for family assets. The more capable amongst them were assigned to protect house scions yet to gain their essences, or low-ranking family members who never had adventurer training. The most important role of a family's private guard was to simply exist. Any aristocratic house lacking a staff of essence users would find its status within society in jeopardy.

Many of the Earth essence users met the exact criteria for a house guard, being trained in combat but having advanced through monster cores. Their unusual backstory proved exotic enough that they were able to command high salaries from noble houses that valued such things.

By the time Jason was ready to send out call through the System, his companions had already built a solid list of Earth expatriates. If Jason's message didn't work out, they would still be able to collect a lot of people. It was the ones who had gone roaming, like Li Li Mei who would be the problem. Without a way to call them back, they would have to be abandoned, at least for the immediacy. Jason had no intention of chasing down trails a decade or more old, hunting them one by one.

Jason sent out his message, and his diligence in preparing for it seemed to pay off. It did appear to target the earthlings and no one else. The people who answered the call were all from Earth, at least at first, and there were no reports of anyone else getting strange messages about another world.

Those enthusiastic to return home were the first to respond, arriving at Jason's cloud palace as directed. Others were uncertain about giving up their new lives, seeing little value in what they'd left behind almost two decades ago. For many, that was half of their lives or more.

Some were on the fence, heading to Jason's cloud palace in search of others like them. They wanted to discuss with other Earthlings whether they should go back. They also had stories of those who had no interest in going back, to the point of fearing they would be forced to. It prompted Jason to send out a second message, telling all who wanted to stay that they were free to.

Whether they wanted to return to Earth or not, many came to cloud palace wanting to meet Jason and his famous companions. Especially amongst those serving major families, many had heard of Jason, Team Biscuit and their exploits.

After the first day, a different kind of problem occurred. People who had never been to Earth were turning up, claiming they had. Some were laughably transparent fakes, trying to escape debts or other problems. Others were better prepared, often would-be spies for various organisations, legitimate and otherwise.

Jason and Farrah ended up screening people. As even an outworlder aura signature could be faked, their screening process had to be more creative.

"Best *Mad Max* movie?" Farrah asked.

"*Fury Road*," the man in front of her said.

"Incorrect."

"What do you mean, incorrect?"

"The correct answer is *Beyond Thunderdome*."

"The one with Tina Turner? She was terrible in that movie!"

Jason rushed to restrain Farrah, who was jabbing a finger at the man as she yelled at him.

“You shut your filthy mouth! You’re never getting back to Earth, you hear me? The planet’s better off without you!”

Jason was certain that many of the genuine humans had been paid handsomely by different interests for a variety of tasks. That was not a disqualifying factor for those genuinely from Earth, but they did get a warning as to what would happen if they caused trouble.

The next problem was harder to deal with than people clearly not from Earth attempting to synopsis the *Police Academy* films.

“Jason, none of these people were alive when those movies were released,” Farrah pointed out. “Even the people from Earth can’t tell you what happened in them.”

“Exactly. Anyone who gives it a go is clearly not from Earth.”

People from Earth now working for the noble houses turned out to be the largest issue. If the guards were happy to stay, that was fine. Many had built good lives in the service of the aristocracy. The nobility had proven unwilling, however, to release those who did want to go back to Earth. It wasn’t every house, but enough to be a problem, the nobles leaning on local laws to keep their people where they were.

Cyrion’s laws were very much built to favour the aristocratic families, and house guards were technically a form of indentured servitude. Very well-paid servitude, but if the noble houses wanted to make an issue of it, they held all the power. Many of those houses were using that power to prevent their guards from leaving.

It didn’t take a lot of investigation to confirm Jason’s immediate assumptions. None of the Earth people were so valuable that the houses had a real need of them. The value they held was that Jason wanted them, and that was an advantage the nobles could leverage.

“I don’t blow up cities on purpose,” Jason muttered to himself. “I don’t blow up cities on purpose.”

It was Jason’s eleventh day in Cyrion, and the fourth day of meetings with representatives of the noble houses. Ignoring his instincts to do something drastic, Jason had chosen a diplomatic approach. He had set up meetings with the aristocratic families, their chosen representatives being a message in and of themselves. An important family member being present was a signal of respect, while a bureaucratic functionary was a slight to Jason and his team.

Some of the meetings were one to one, while others brought all the representatives together. Jason handled the talks himself, for the most part, drawing on the lessons in diplomacy and etiquette he had received from Danielle. She was with him, occasionally taking the forward position, but mostly leaving it to him.

By the fourth day, however, Jason's patience was dangerously thin. These families were opportunists, using legal privilege and what amounted to slave laws to get what they could out of him. There didn't even seem to be something specific they were after; they had found a lever to pull and saw no reason not to pull it. In return for releasing the guards they were asking for anything from Team Biscuit's services in their family's interests to insider information from Clive's Magic Research Association.

Seeing Jason teetering on the edge of doing something very true to his nature, Danielle ended the meetings for the day and led Jason out. The venue was Jason's cloud palace, so they went further in while avatars led the representatives out.

"You're doing very well," she said. "In terms of keeping your temperament, at least."

"These talks are going nowhere in a circle."

"Because you've been unwilling to make any concessions. If you want them to give something up, you need to as well."

"Their stance is immoral."

"They don't care. Or even share your opinion. In the culture of Cyrion high society, this is all normal."

"I'm entirely happy to respect someone's culture, so long as that culture is at least nominally worthy of respect. I can accept people having different values to me, but there has to be a line. Using what amount to slave laws to trade people like chips in a card game is over that line for me."

"Then you are at an impasse."

"Not necessarily."

"Meaning?" she asked, her voice thick with suspicion.

"I realised from the beginning that these people were simply being opportunistic. They saw that I valued something they had more than they did, and could use the circumstances here in Cyrion to take advantage. While we've spent four days running around in circles, I've been preparing something that could possibly recontextualise those circumstances."

"Jason, what did you do?"

“Nothing. Yet. I wasn’t even sure I could make it work. Figuring out how to target messages to the people from Earth was good practise, though. I’ve been building on that to do something a little more widespread.”

“Please tell me you aren’t going to try and blow up Cyrion.”

“Nothing like that.”

“Then what?”

“Well, I started by getting a list of all the countries and city states that have indentured servitude laws...”

Chapter 931

Following Through on Bad Ideas

Hils Jaramaris was not a happy man. He had been happy, enjoying his role as the Storm Kingdom's ambassador to Estercost. The nations were rivals, but friendly ones, their distance leaving them with few reasons for conflict. This meant that Hils, for the most part, was a glorified mailman for diplomatic messages. This suited him just fine, allowing him to pursue his alchemy far from domestic Storm Kingdom politics. It was the arrival of Team Biscuit that cast a shadow over his sunny days.

It had been shaping up to be a relaxing month. Finalising a trade accord, cycling through some new staff members, fresh from home. Then the king's cousin and her adventuring team arrived. He'd known they were coming, of course, and that the problem would inevitably be Jason Asano. He knew the man mostly from reputation and Adventure Society alerts.

Hils had met the man briefly, but that had been two monster surges ago. It was right before Hils had reached silver, back when he was still adventuring full time. He'd been with his friend Orin, who went on to travel with Asano, but Hils knew better than to ask. Orin wasn't one to talk much, especially about the days with his old team. They had followed Asano into a hole in the ground, and most of them hadn't come back.

Compared to what Hils had been afraid of, the arrival of Team Biscuit and their first days in the city were unremarkable. No royal entanglements, no mass destruction. He'd read the Adventure Society reports of the latest city to be destroyed with Asano in the middle of it. It seemed that Asano had realised Cyrior wasn't some backwater where he could throw around his gold rank like a hammer.

Hils even had a nice dinner with Zara, where he'd managed to get some more insight into Team Biscuit. She was an old friend from back in their days as young Rimaros aristocrats. That was before she went off adventuring, first with Orin's ill-fated team and then with Asano's. She'd been willing to offer details of that time he couldn't get from Orin himself.

While she was open with stories more than a decade old, she was more careful regarding her current team. Her firsthand knowledge filled gaps in the reports he'd seen, but she withheld occasional details and refused to answer certain questions. Team Biscuit had its secrets, especially Asano himself.

Hils had been optimistic about Zara and her team's visit. He'd started hearing about issues between Asano and some of the noble houses, but nothing that required

intervention. The issue was comfortingly normal, being that the noble houses had found leverage on someone and were looking to squeeze everything they could out of them. The question was how a team of gold rank adventurers would react.

Looking into it, Hils found the issue both straightforward and minor. Asano wanted a group of people to leave with him, but many were stuck under indenture contracts. The families were looking to gouge Asano's team for their release, and he was being intractable about making concessions.

To get his way, all Asano needed to do was give the families their pound of flesh. It was standard diplomatic fare, and they wouldn't push too far. Instead, Asano kept talking about moral imperatives, which would get him nowhere. The kind of public attention he would need to shine on the families to make them even pretend to care would be immense. Then he remembered what he'd read of Asano's history, and what he'd learned directly from Zara.

Almost a week into Asano's conflict with the nobility, there were signs of trouble. Asano had ceased all efforts at negotiation and hadn't been seen in days. Hils reached out to Zara, and her immediacy in setting up another meeting only added to his concerns.

Hils met with Zara in a parlour inside the Rimaros embassy building. It was a small and intimate space, shrouded in the most potent privacy magic available. Located close to one of the more discreet entrances to the building, the room's usual purpose was for clandestine meetings with close allies. He was not happy when she requested they use it.

Their meeting began with small talk, plus the obligatory questions on when she would return to Rimaros and rejoin the royal family. Hils had no investment in that, but he was under *very* clear instructions to bring it up every time they met. With incidents like Zara's encounter with the draconian prince, returning to the fold would offer her greater diplomatic protection. The questions came from both the current and previous Storm Kings, so there was no way Hils would skip them, even if it annoyed the former Hurricane Princess. He pushed through them as fast as he could, however, having more of an agenda this time.

"Zara, what is going on with Asano? Is he about to do something ill-advised?"

"Usually, yes."

"Zara, this is serious."

"I know, Hils. And what I'm about to tell you, I'm only able to do so because of a favour to me. Since I'm on his team, and my family is my family, Jason decided to let me give them a few days warning of what is about to happen."

"Let you? Whatever politics might be at play, Zara, you're a princess of the Storm Kingdom first."

“Don’t try to lecture me on conflicting loyalties, Hils. A good boy like you has no idea of what I’ve had to navigate over the years.”

“Which is why your father and cousin want you to come home.”

“They are not the highest authority in the Storm Kingdom, Hils.”

“They are the current and former Storm Kings. Who is higher than that?”

Her only response was a flat look.

“The founder?” he asked. “His Ancestral Majesty?”

“During the last monster surge, Ancestor Soramir personally took me aside. He told me that Jason Asano is the most important political relationship the Storm Kingdom had had since its founding.”

“That seems a bit much.”

“I can see how it could, from the outside. But I don’t need you to agree with me, only to warn my cousin. Jason has offered our kingdom a head start on formulating a response.”

“A response to what?”

“I need for you to understand something, Hils. My expectation is that you will respect the courtesy we are being shown here. That means not letting what I’m about to tell you get out. No using the water links or the sky links when you take this to my cousin. You are going to portal back to Rimaros in person.”

“Zara, what is this about?”

“The System.”

Hils was informed enough to know that the System was allegedly connected to Asano, although few details had been confirmed. Supposedly, the new means of interfacing with magic was identical to a personal power Asano has possessed years earlier. What was confirmed was how important the System had become in a very short time. More than just personally valuable to essence users, many organisations were increasingly relying on it. From craft guilds and local governments to the Magic Society, the System was rapidly being adopted into their operations.

The Adventure Society was especially enamoured of the advantages it offered. From quantifying powers to identifying people with restricted essences to managing and identifying loot, the System had been an absolute boon. Previously unseen essence abilities tapping into the system were starting to appear, and ritual magic that relied on it was being developed.

“What about the System?” Hils asked warily.

“In a few days, Jason is going to turn it off in every country and city state that has indentured servitude laws.”

Hils blinked. A few moments later, he blinked again.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“He’s going to turn off the System in each nation and—”

“He can do that?”

“He can.”

“Are you sure?”

“We’ll see in a few days, but yes. I believe that he can.”

“How? Where does he get that kind of access? That level of control?”

“It hasn’t been spread around, but I suppose it will be soon. Jason *is* the System, Hils.”

“What does that even mean?”

“Just what I said. He is the System. It’s an extension of him. He’s still learning how to control it — he told me it was like learning a new language — but he’s confident he can do this.”

“He is the System?”

“Yes.”

“So, if he dies, the whole thing goes away.”

“He can’t die. Not anymore.”

“Are you saying that he’s the god of the System?”

“The great astral being,” she corrected. “He doesn’t know if there’s going to be a god of it. The goddess of death and the Reaper, for example, have distinct roles in administering dead souls. He doesn’t know if a similar situation will require a god of the System to form. Even if one does, it will probably take a few centuries. Look how long Purity is taking to come back. We still aren’t sure exactly how long Disguise was acting in his place.”

He stood up and paced around the room, running his hands through his hair distractedly as he thought. He finally stopped, leaning on the back of his chair with both hands as he looked at the still-sitting Zara.

“Okay,” he said. “Disregarding, for the moment, the idea that Asano is some kind of god-adjacent supreme being, you’re saying that he can just turn off the System on a whim?”

“It’s more involved than that, to my understanding. At least until his power grows. But yes, that’s essentially what I’m saying.”

“You’re saying he can do this, and his power is still growing?”

“Hils, do you understand what a great astral being is?”

“Obviously not, but I know the Builder was one. Now you’re saying that Asano is the same, and he’s going to use his power to try and hold the world hostage.”

“That’s not how he framed it, but your description is at least broadly accurate.”

“People are going to throw a fit. The adoption rate for using the System in every group from governments to churches is... are there any exemptions? Churches, the Adventure Society?”

“No. And just between us, he’s already secured endorsements of his plans from Dominion and Liberty. That’s going to matter, given how rarely they agree on anything.”

“If the churches already know, I don’t see why you’re being so secretive. It’s definitely going to come out ahead of time.”

“The churches don’t know. Not yet.”

“You just finished saying he had the endorsements from the churches of Dominion and Liberty.”

“No, Hils, I didn’t.”

“Wait, were you talking about the actual gods?”

“It can’t be that much of a surprise. Surely, you’ve heard about what he’s like with them. He had them around for a cup of tea with the whole team. It was a very odd experience.”

“Gods can drink tea?”

“They’re gods, Hils. There isn’t much they can’t do, whatever Jason might say about their limitations.”

“And they’re going to support this publicly?”

“Yes.”

“That changes things significantly. Or maybe it doesn’t, I don’t know. I have no frame of reference for some gold ranker holding the planet hostage by threatening to turn off a major facet of magic itself. Because he’s actually some kind of ridiculous being. I saw one report claim he was one of the messengers’ gods.”

“He is, and they’re called astral kings.”

“I thought you said he was a great astral being.”

“Yes, it’s all very complicated. What you need to understand, Hils, is that Jason isn’t threatening to do anything. He’s doing it. I’m here so the Storm King has a chance to get out ahead of it.”

“Ahead of it how? He wants to abolish indentured servitude? That’s a cornerstone of the legal system for most of the civilised world. What does he want us to replace it with? Those places where they lock people up for years on end, the way they do in Kurdansk? Even ignoring what the point of it is, do you have any idea of the operating costs of those places?”

“He’s not making specific demands beyond the elimination of indentured servant laws.”

“Meaning that he expects us to throw out a major part of the justice system and offers nothing to put in its place.”

“Do you think it would be better if he did start dictating how countries should change things?”

“That’s exactly what he’s doing!”

“Well, yes,” Zara conceded. “But he wants everyone to find their own solutions, rather than dictating them himself. Which is what Dominion said he should do, by the way.”

“Why does Dominion even approve of this? Shouldn’t he be in favour of indentured servitude? Or any servitude, for that matter.”

“I’m not sure. I wondered the same, but Jason said that Dominion isn’t what most people think he is. We didn’t sit down for a theological discussion, though. What we did talk about was potential replacement systems for indenture. Jason won’t dictate what people should do, but favours a shift in the current system that only makes limited changes.”

“How limited?”

“His problem is the slavery aspect.”

“Indenture isn’t slavery.”

“Except that sometimes it is, Hils, and you know it.”

“No system is perfect, Zara.”

“Which is not an excuse to not make them better. The current practise is to sell off indenture contracts, or give them to the criminal’s victims. Jason favours taking what were indenture contracts and replacing them with public service orders. For most practical purposes, the systems stay as they are, but without selling people. Local authorities use the labour for public service, with regulation in place to reduce and remedy instances of abuse.”

Hils rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“So, mostly just shifting the indenture holders from private individuals to government authorities.”

“It’s an option. One that has already been working in some city states for decades. There are still problems, but the worst of the abuses have been curtailed.”

“Worst of the abuses. We’re talking about criminals, here, and it’s not as bad as you make out.”

“Do you genuinely believe that?”

“Of course I do. If I didn’t, what kind of monster would that make me?”

“An unfortunately common variety. You know of Sophie Wexler, from my team?”

“Yes.”

“Did you know that she was an indentured servant?”

“I think I recall reading about that.”

“The local Magic Society branch director was obsessed with her. The Adventure Society director made that happen in return for certain concessions. It took Jason and Emir Bahadir stepping in to prevent that from happening.”

“See? The system works.”

“People with undue influence stepping in to stop other people with undue influence isn’t the process working, Hils. It’s the process being so broken that the corruption is folding in on itself.”

“Look, Zara, I don’t entirely disagree with you. I don’t think it’s as bad as you make out, but what I’m really telling you what everyone else is going to say.”

Zara nodded.

“I told him much the same. As did Danielle Geller.”

“Did you tell him that he’ll be standing up to every government in the world?”

“I did.”

“And what did he say to that?”

“That he’s stood up to worse. That people know who he is, now, so it’s time to show them *what* he is.”

Hils let out a groan.

“He’s one of those obnoxiously melodramatic people, isn’t he?”

“Oh, you have no idea. Sometimes I’ll spot him with one foot propped up on something, staring into the middle distance.”

“Zara, this is going to be a mess. Countries aren’t going to cave in to some random guy telling them to change how their legal system works. I don’t care what he is or how crazy the stories about him are. Even diamond rankers don’t act like this.”

“He’s not a diamond ranker, Hils. He’s a man who invites a couple of gods around for a cup of tea and they actually show up.”

“Then maybe you should go around and tell everyone that story. See how that works out.”

Zara got to her feet.

“Hils, I’m not here to convince you of anything. This is just a chance for our country to get a few more days than everyone else to formulate a reaction. What my cousin does from there is up to him.”

“This is a bad idea, Zara. You should try and stop him from doing this.”

“If people could stop Jason Asano from following through on bad ideas, the world would be a different place. I told him how messy this was going to be.”

“What did he say?”

“Something about a spider and responsibility and his uncle, I think? It didn’t make a lot of sense.”

Chapter 932

Heavily Compromised Baked Goods

Garret Headingway was an upper-echelon member of House Headingway, one of Estercost's pre-eminent families. He was taking breakfast when his butler arrived.

"Morning mail, my lord."

"Anything interesting, James?"

"Something from Jason Asano."

"Oh? He's been locked up in his cloud palace for days, seeing no one. Do you think he's finally come to his senses?"

"As the one who investigated him for you, sir, my guess would be no. More likely is that he's about to do something drastic, as I warned you."

"This is Cyrion, James, not the Geller's little domain down south. There's only so drastic he can be, here."

"I would reiterate, my lord, that his record suggests that may not be the case. At the very least, I doubt he agrees with you."

Garret finished buttering his savoury scone, then took an appreciative bite. He sat it down and wiped his hands on a napkin before picking up the letter James had set on the table.

To whom it may concern,

I am sending a number of these letters to the various interests who have been negotiating for the freedom of my fellow Earth expatriates over the last week. Although you are the catalyst for what is about to happen, please know that you are not the cause. Instead, I would like to thank you for reminding me of a promise I made to myself long ago, when I was a powerless young man in a world of vast magic.

Power is a dangerous and wonderous thing. When given the chance to do whatever we want, we show the world what we always wanted to do. Sometimes we lose our way, or forget the principles that guided us when we were powerless. Do we become tyrants, claiming everything for ourselves? Do we embrace the moral responsibility of using our power to improve the world around us?

Trying to make the world better is a very good way to make it worse, but to have the power and do nothing is an abdication of responsibility. Many years ago, I promised myself that, should I have the ability, I would try to wipe out the blot that is slavery, whatever terms its perpetrators couch it in. When you, the recipients of this letter, used such laws to keep people from returning to their homes, you reminded me of that old promise. Of other friends exploited. So now, at the risk of adding to the harm, I am attempting to make things better.

Let me be clear that this is not a negotiating position. There is no talking this down, making exemptions or trading the freedom of the people of Earth for amelioration. While that conflict is the instigation point for what is about to occur, these events are larger than a group of petty aristocrats. While you can be thanked for inspiring my actions, you are ultimately unimportant.

*Regards,
Jason Asano.*

Garret handed the letter to James, waiting while his butler read it over.

“It would seem that you were right, James. He doesn’t say what he’s going to do, but his ambitions are certainly grand enough. He’s going to attempt something drastic.”

“It would seem so, my lord.”

“Any idea what?”

“Given the scale his letter implies, my guess would be something either related to the gods or the System.”

“The System? Right, your report on him mentioned that he’s related to it in some way. Was that confirmed?”

“My sources inside the Adventure Society say yes.”

“Well, see if you can find out some more—”

System Alert: Reduced Service Areas

- [System Administrator] will shortly withdraw System access in regions of Pallimustus currently operating with slavery, indentured servitude or similar legal systems. No one within those regions will be able to access any System functions. Abilities that integrate with the System will have alternate functionality while inside those areas. Rituals that utilise the System will have diminished functionality or fail entirely.

- [System Administrator] will soon be leaving Pallimustus for an indeterminate period. System access to individual regions will be reviewed on his return. This message will remain active for one full day. At the end of that period, the System will cease to be accessible from within the affected areas. For a full list, please see below.
-

Garret skimmed the list.

“This is everywhere,” he muttered.

“If one dismisses remote, rural and low-magic areas, certainly.”

Garret took another bite of his scone while he considered the message.

“James, in your assessment of the man, do you think Asano can really do something on a scale that this letter implies? And if he can, will he, or is it a bluff?”

“My assessment would be that he does have the ability. If it is a bluff, it’s not one I would recommend calling.”

“He’s going to make a world of enemies with this.”

“I believe you will find, my lord, that powerful enemies are kind of his thing.”

Garret looked up from where he was rereading the message.

“That’s an odd turn of phrase, James. I don’t believe I’ve ever heard you use it.”

“To be honest, my lord, James is unconscious in the basement. How strong is your poison resistance, by the way? I have no idea how he put so much of it in those scones without them tasting funny.”

“What?” Garret asked, and suddenly realised that his vision was going blurry. “Who are you?”

“You know, it’s good to have Jason back,” Belinda told him. “Humphrey never lets me kidnap people.”

Jacinda Adeline was having a very bad day. Being director of the Adventure Society’s Cyrion branch was one of the most demanding and political appointments in the entire organisation. This was never more so than when something extreme happened, from the appearance of a diamond-rank monster to the coronation of a new monarch. Adventurers themselves were often as not the problem. Every time some diamond ranker showed up, looking to take off with half the city’s gold rankers on some personal project, Jacinda felt like she was getting a stomach ulcer. She wasn’t, because magic, but it felt like it.

While she had been aware of Team Biscuit’s arrival, and of the history around Jason Asano, it had been one more thing on her plate. She’d been monitoring his interactions with the Cyrion noble houses, more closely since he cut off dialogue without results, but it

all fell under the heading of minor concerns. That changed drastically with the System announcing that it would no longer be available as of tomorrow morning.

Asano wasn't mentioned by name, but the wide-ranging messages that took place in Boko made reference to the 'System Administrator' as well. People were already putting the pieces together, and the doors of Asano's cloud palace had a bigger crowd than the door to Jacinta's office suite. In the dozen or so hours since the message appeared, she'd been dealing with aristocrats, guilds, royalty, the Magic Society and even her own people.

There was a knock on the door, her assistant not waiting for a reply before opening it.

"She's here, Boss."

"Send her straight through."

Jacinta stood up and headed to a painting on the wall that reached floor to ceiling, depicting some adventurers looking generically heroic. She tapped a specific point on the frame and the painting retracted into the wall before sliding aside to reveal a full bar. She didn't know which of her predecessors had it installed, but on days like these, she sent them silent blessings.

Jacinta was pouring the second glass of amber liquid when Danielle Geller walked into the office, closing the door behind her. The women wordlessly moved to one of several couches in the spacious room and sat down, side by side. Jacinta handed over one of the glasses and they clinked them together before drinking. Danielle took a sip while Jacinta emptied her glass in one gulp.

"I thought you might be having that kind of day."

"Dani, what in the dark gods' armpit sweat is going on?" Jacinta exploded. "You told me that he hired you to stop him from doing things like this."

"I did suggest a more measured approach. Strongly suggested."

"He clearly didn't listen."

"No, he did."

"You're telling me that this is the more measured approach?"

"I am."

"He kidnapped seven members of some of the most influential families in Estercost."

"Allegedly."

"A copy of the same letter from him was found in each location, along with heavily compromised baked goods."

"That does sound like him," Danielle conceded.

"And that letter sounds like a manifesto."

"He's not trying to force anyone into anything."

“That’s exactly what he’s trying to do. And it won’t work.”

“He’s aware. That’s why I say he’s not trying to force anything. He is fully aware that whole nations are not going to bow to his whims. He is choosing to no longer share a capability under his control as he feels it would be an endorsement of practices he finds morally repugnant. In short, he’s not going to support any authority that tolerates slavery or slavery-like social structures.”

“Indenture isn’t slavery.”

“If you want to make that argument to Jason, I’d recommend beating your head against the wall instead. You won’t have to leave your office, and the wall might actually budge. Jason won’t, especially if Sophie Wexler is in the room.”

“The former indenture on Asano’s team.”

“And the only one who could actually get Jason to reverse his position, not that she will. She’s his biggest supporter in this.”

“I read the reports of her pre-adventuring history, but they were quite lean.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet they were,” Danielle muttered.

“You were involved?”

“No. It all went down while I was off on a major expedition where the Builder cult tore us to shreds. While that was going on, the corrupt Adventure Society director was cutting a deal with the even more corrupt Magic Society director. The plan was to sell Wexler to him, for reasons exactly as nasty as you’d imagine. Asano and Emir Bahadir managed to stop it, but I would advise against telling Wexler that indenture isn’t slavery.”

“She won’t be open to convincing Asano to not do this, then.”

“No. I’m just telling you this so you realise that your best shot is such a bad one that you shouldn’t bother.”

“He can’t be convinced to make an exemption for the Adventure Society?”

“I tried that tack. He said that if he makes one compromise, it will become a constant pressure to make more. He’s not wrong. For all that he hopes for change, Jace, he isn’t expecting anyone to make any concessions. He’s resolved to make no concessions in return.”

“Surely he understands that he can’t do this?”

“Do what, Jace? Take away something he gave everyone for nothing? The System was always his to give, and his to take away. All that’s changed is that now people realise it. They’re probably about to start worrying about how much of their information he can tap into.”

“He can just pull anything from the System out of the air?”

“I don’t know. He says he can’t, but I don’t know to what degree he really means *won’t*.”

“But he has the control to do what he’s threatening?”

“It’s not a threat, Jace. It’s happening.”

“How is that even possible?”

“As someone who’s known Jason for a long time, I can tell you that question comes up a lot. The answers range from the nonsensical to the non-existent, and you eventually realise that it’s better not to ask.”

“That is a spectacularly unhelpful answer. Dani, I have everyone from the Magic Society director to the Queen harassing me for answers. I need something better than ‘some guy turns out to have god-like power over the System, but I don’t know the details.’ They aren’t going to like that anymore than I do.”

“Tell them that Pallimustus has gotten by without the System for the entirety of its history. It’s going to keep getting along just fine without it.”

“That isn’t how people work, and you know it. If you give them something they like, only to take it away, they’re going to throw a tantrum. And people love the System, Dani. / love the System.”

“Then they have to decide if they like their slaves more. If withholding the System was going to cause people harm, he’d be more flexible, but it wasn’t something they knew they wanted until they had it. They don’t need it, so he has no compunction about taking it from them.”

“It’s not that simple, Dani, and you know it. Asano isn’t some god we can’t do anything about. He’s a person, and everyone knows where to find him.”

“If you believed that, Jace, you’d already have the society beating down his door. He’s not a god, but he moves in the same circles as one. The Cyrion nobles might not know what they’re dealing with, but you do. You’ve seen the reports.”

“Reports? I had the damn archbishops of Dominion and Liberty in here. Seeing those two agree on anything was downright creepy. What I’m looking for is some insight on how to handle this situation. How do we get Asano to not do this?”

“He’s been clear on that, Jace. I know that’s not going to happen, and so does he.”

“Then what’s the point of all this? What does he want?”

“The Cyrion nobles he’s been dealing with have been squeezing him because they think they can. I think that has triggered memories of his time on his own planet. That was a bad time for him, and I think he’s looking to work out some of that old anger here.”

“Isn’t he planning to go back there?”

“Yes, which I imagine is part of this. He knows that if he throws his power around there, he can do real damage.”

“He’s doing damage here!”

“No, Jace, he isn’t. He’s taking away people’s shiny new toys because he doesn’t like some of the things they’re doing. He wants to show, once and for all, that he’s not a tool for people to pick up and use. He’s challenging the world to try, so that everyone can see what happens.”

“What am I meant to do about that? People aren’t going to accept the loss of the System.”

“Make them. If you want to blindside Jason, prove him wrong. Tell him that the world won’t force him into anything, but it won’t be extorted either. It will live without the System, but he doesn’t get to tell nations what their laws should be.”

“And if he decides to push his agenda harder?”

“He won’t. His friends will stop him, if nothing else.”

“Couldn’t you have stopped him earlier?”

“Probably. But sometimes extreme results require extreme actions. Jason has proven that time and again, and we aren’t opposed to his principles in this.”

“You’re sitting there and telling me that extremism is a good thing?”

Danielle drained what was left of her glass.

“I don’t know, Jace. I can’t fight gods. I can’t destroy cities and conjure new ones out of thin air. I can’t put a stop to laws that most of the world thinks are normal and natural.”

Jacinta rubbed her temples against an encroaching headache.

“I’m not going to get any more from you than that, am I? You’re saying to tell him that he can’t have what he wants, but we won’t try and take what we want.”

“Like many things with Jason, all you can do is limp away from the mess.”

“And the nobles he took?”

“Allegedly.”

“Don’t be disingenuous, Dani. Their families are going to go after Asano for that, evidence or not. His team, too, including your boy.”

“Oh, I think they’ll find there’s someone else they need to deal with first.”

“Dani, what did Asano do?”

Garret Headingway awoke to a throbbing pain in his everything. His senses slowly fought their way through a fog, coming into focus one by one. He could taste the air, too hot and dry for home. He smelled sand and dirt, felt bare earth beneath him. His silver-

rank hearing picked out the sounds of people, muffled by thick walls. There was a mix of languages, only a few he recognised. He was somewhere in the desert regions, well east of Estercost.

He opened his eyes on a dim room, light passing through a small, slatted window. It was an empty room, or maybe a shed, with adobe walls. He was one of seven people in the room, most of whom were still unconscious. The one person already awake was leaning against the wall, looking disgruntled. Garret recognised him, Patterson Kennington. Looking around, he realised they were all Cyrion noblemen. From houses who had been in negotiation with—

“Jason Asano,” Patterson said bitterly. “He put us here.”

“You saw him?” Garret asked.

Patterson shook his head.

“Did you get a letter?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Garret said. His groggy brain finally noticed a thick collar around Patterson’s neck, made of dark, crude metal. He reached up and felt an identical one around his own neck.

“Don’t bother with magic or aura senses,” Patterson told him. “It’s a suppression collar. A specific kind of one, if my guess about where we are is right. The walls are reinforced, too, so don’t bother trying that either.”

Garret glanced at the wall beside Patterson. The mud bricks should have parted like paper to Patterson’s silver-rank strength, but several shallow fist marks were all it had managed.

“Where do you think we are?” Garret asked. “Eastern desert?”

“Obviously,” Patterson sneered. “Ever hear of a little dirtball country called Sadi Andali?”

“No.”

“Well, it’s famous for being almost lawless. The Adventure Society doesn’t even have a branch here. They just send people in from time to time, sweeping for illegal research and restricted essences. They find plenty of both.”

“What are we doing here?”

“Remember when I said *almost* lawless? The one set of laws they do have governs the slave markets.”

Chapter 933

The Line Between Mortal and Immortal

Vandrick arrived at the entrance to Jason Asano's cloud palace. There was a mob out front, and had been since the System went dark. They were pretending to be a spontaneously formed group, protesting the heavy-handed influence of the outsider. Anyone with any real knowledge was aware they had been placed by certain noble houses of Cyrion, anticipating negative attention regarding potential actions against Asano. The 'spontaneous' crowd was one of the ways they were working to shape the narrative.

The palace was on a lake reserved for cloud constructs and other temporary floating structures. Vandrick recognised the palace of Emir Bahadir floating nearby, the man and his retinue having arrived the day before. Vandrick respected his loyalty, arriving to support a friend who had much of the world against him right now.

Vandrick let out the faintest whiff of diamond-rank aura as he approached the crowd. They were instantly falling over themselves to clear a path. They were gathered on the shore where a cloud bridge extended to the palace. The bridge itself being empty suggested it would disappear from under the feet of unwelcome visitors. Vandrick walked slowly across, observing the cloud palace. Rather than one massive structure, it was a complex of buildings, linked by enclosed sky bridges and underwater tunnels.

The design of the buildings was in the Vitesse style, complete with plants growing over and out of every part of the building. Moss covered much of the white cloud walls. Leafy vines dangled from balconies and flowers bloomed on windowsills. Even the underwater tunnels were coated in kelp and coral. Asano apparently favoured tropical plants, with vibrant greens and large, bright flowers.

The large double doors opened at Vandrick's approach, revealing an atrium more like a garden than a room. He stepped inside and immediately froze, having felt something he hadn't in a long time: threatened. A small smile played across his lips.

"Interesting," he murmured as he looked around.

The entrance was a multi-storey atrium, with even more plants than the exterior. Multiple waterfalls spilled from mezzanine levels into water features, running through the garden that filled the floor. Paths led through the gardens and over little bridges to doors and stairwells set into the walls. The air was humid, with the splashing of the waterfalls and the sounds of birds and insects. High above, the atrium seemed open to the sky, but Vandrick could sense a barrier of invisible mist.

His gaze settled on the one feature whose purpose he wasn't sure of. An alcove in the wall had a series of narrow poles that appeared to rise into the upper reaches of the building. There was a sign with a name on it behind each pole, matching each member of Asano's team. He noted that the one labelled 'Neil' had a thicker pole than the others.

Vandrick heard something from above, and a moment later, someone slid down one of the poles. Both his aura and the sign behind his pole said that this was Jason Asano. He was wearing tan short pants, sandals and a colourful shirt with a tropical flower print.

"G'day, bloke. What can I do you for?"

"The Queen of Estercost and several other interested parties have asked me to arbitrate over your withdrawal of the System."

"Meaning they asked you to come in here, hold me upside down and shake me until the System falls out."

"They phrased it differently, but that was the general sentiment."

"But you're not going to do that, are you?"

"No. But it is time someone sat down with you and had a discussion."

"About?"

"You stand with a foot on each side of a dangerous line, Mr Asano. I'm hoping to help you navigate it successfully."

"That sounds good. And call me Jason."

"Very well, Jason. My name is Vandrick Macarro, but you may call me Van."

"Okay, Van. I just made some scones I've got on a cooling rack upstairs, so we'll have to chat there."

Vandrick glanced over at the alcove with the poles.

"We don't have to use those, do we?"

"No," Jason said with a laugh. "They're for coming down only."

"That doesn't seem efficient when gold rankers can levitate quite effectively, even without your aura advantages."

"Oh, it's definitely not efficient. But what's the point of living forever if you don't take the time to have fun?"

Jason started floating into the air and Vandrick followed. On the highest mezzanine, they landed and walked down a hallway where the floor was wooden slats over running water. Plants lined the walls, and a fresh breeze blew through.

"That music is unlike anything I've heard," Vandrick said. "Is it from your world?"

"Yeah, that's Laura Branigan."

Jason led Vandrlick to an expansive kitchen that opened onto a covered balcony. Flowering vines draped from overhead, dangling over a picnic table. Sitting at it were four people, including one with the characteristic broad shoulders and chiselled features of a Geller. That would be Humphrey, one of the family's more famous members. The woman next to him was probably his mother, based on their shared complexion and the interaction of their auras. Sitting opposite them were Emir Bahadir, who Vandrlick had met, and a woman who was likely his wife.

"I'm just going to sell my cows at Kansas City," Emir said. "Give me six extra dollars."

"You know you'll lose points for that," his wife told him.

"And if I don't get more money, I won't get any more points than what I have."

In the kitchen, two women were wearing aprons and stirring something in a large bowl each.

"No, Sophie, stop," one of them said.

"Oh, come on, Ketis. What's wrong now?"

"You're going too fast. Even ignoring the spatter, we're making whipped cream, not butter."

"I like butter," Sophie said defensively.

"This is for the scones."

"I like butter on scones."

Ketis noticed them enter, despite Vandrlick's aura being fully withdrawn. She was the only one who stared, the others glancing his way before going back to what they were doing. It was a novel experience for Vandrlick, the diamond ranker normally getting a very different reception.

"Who's your friend?" Sophie asked. "The Adventure Society finally send a diamond ranker to spank you?"

"Something like that. Everyone, this is Vandrlick. Vandrlick, this is everyone. Well, not everyone. Where are the others?"

"Like you can't sense exactly where they are," Sophie told him.

"I like to give people their privacy," Jason said.

"Zara, Farrah and Lindy are still swimming," Ketis said. Her tone was distracted as she continued to stare at the diamond-rank visitor. "Humphrey's dad kept trying to pinch the scones and Stash dragged him away. He knows a lot about baking for a dragon."

"The others should be back soon," Humphrey said. "They went to the market to see how many types of jam they could find."

Emir and his wife rose from the table, approaching to offer a respectful greeting. He introduced his wife, Constance, then they went back to their game. Danielle Geller didn't move to introduce herself, but did nod a greeting when he spotted her looking him over.

In their previous meeting, Bahadir had the fear Vandrick was used to from people when meeting diamond rankers. The rest of the group seemed the same, aside from the one girl still staring at him. He was halfway tempted to leak some of his aura to see what happened, but squashed the immature urge.

Jason led Vandrick into an adjoining room, a door of mist forming to seal them off. When it did, the sound from outside vanished, despite this room also being open to the outside. Again, Vandrick sensed a powerful but invisible mist barrier. The room was a meditation space, in a rustic tropical style with woven floor mats. It reminded Vandrick of Arnote, the least populous of the three islands of Rimaros. At a gesture from Jason, two streams of cloud rose from the floor. They took the form of wicker chairs, facing one other. Jason claimed one while waving Vandrick towards the other.

"So," Jason said. "What brings you by, Van?"

"You're in a very odd position, Jason. You're gold rank, but you're also somewhere on the far side of diamond. We diamond rankers, and now the Adventure Society, have largely decided to split the difference and consider you a diamond ranker."

"I've been told as much. I'm guessing this is the conversation where you give me the talk about how to behave like a good diamond ranker."

"Not exactly. Diamond rankers, as a rule, don't like being told what to do. They tend to react quite drastically."

"I should fit right in, then."

"Actually, yes, although your unusual circumstances present commensurately unusual challenges. The line between diamond rank and everything below it is more extreme than at any other rank. The line between gold and diamond is the threshold between mortality and immortality, with diamond rankers being ageless and near immortal. Accordingly, we move away from mortal concerns, all the more as time rolls on. We don't have rules, as such, although we do step in when those amongst us get out of line. What we do have is etiquette."

"Meaning that if I'm a naughty boy, I won't get the rest of you coming down on me. You'll just all think that I'm an asshole."

"Something like that, yes. I had a discussion with the Queen, along with other members of the Estercost elite and a number of ambassadors. I told them that the position of the diamond rank community is that the System is yours to administer."

“Meaning you told them they aren’t allowed to go after me over it.”

“Yes. But that also means that if anyone should go after you, they are disregarding us to do so.”

Jason narrowed his eyes.

“You want me to be the one who smacks down anyone who decides to come after me over it.”

“We do. Which brings us back the points of etiquette. Diamond rankers, on this world, at least, are the ultimate symbols and expressions of power. We expect one another to respect that, and act in such a way that the rest of the world does as well. There are several tenets to this, and one is that we take care of our own business. That is not to say that we don’t lean on our friends and connections, but we are expected to hold our own. When a diamond ranker helps another diamond ranker, it is because they are friends or allies, not out of diamond ranker solidarity. If you can’t stand alone, the rest of us will stand by as your legs are cut out from under you.”

“So, the first rule of being the most powerful is you have to be the most powerful.”

“Precisely. The second tenet of diamond-rank etiquette is to respect the boundary between mortal and immortal. When a diamond ranker is young, we are a lot more flexible about this. You have descendants to watch over, interests from your mortal days you don’t want to see fall apart. Most of all, you still think like a mortal. But after half a millennium or so, you are expected to step back. If we do everything for them, and never let them find their own way, we stunt them. Left to their own devices, mortals will always surprise you. There is a drive that comes with mortality that pushes them to innovate. To make things better. The passion of youth.”

Vandrick pointed a casual finger at Jason.

“That’s where you are now. You have power, maybe more than you ever thought you would. You want to use it, to make things better.”

“And hopefully not make them worse.”

“That is always the danger,” Vandrick agreed. “We give more leeway to young diamond rankers, but the danger of them causing harm is why we expect them to limit themselves. Let us look at some of the young diamond rankers you know. Allayeth and Charist limit themselves geographically, for example, restricting themselves to Yareh and the surrounding regions. The Mirror King is much the same in his own territory. Roland Remore’s agenda is more expansive, but he rarely brings his direct power to bear. He limits himself to mostly working through agents and proxies.”

“And you expect me to limit myself.”

“No one is going to force you. What we hope is that you come to understand the virtues of limiting our influence on the mortal world. I suspect, given your positions on power and authority, that this would be a natural fit for you.”

“You’re not wrong,” Jason conceded.

“I will say this,” Vandrick said. “There is an expectation that very new diamond rankers will run a little wild. Settle old scores and instigate changes in mortal society they have always wanted to. So long as they don’t take anything too far, the rest of us let this go. What’s the point of achieving more power than almost anyone, ever, if you’re just going to be told not to do the things you always wanted to do?”

“That seems reasonable.”

“I think so. The rule of thumb is that everyone gets one. One great big world changing action that affects the mortals. After that, you’re expected to be more nuanced in your approach. You have forever, so there is an expectation that you will be patient.”

“And mine is using the System to try and get everyone to abolish slavery.”

“Yes. As such, no one from the general diamond rank community will challenge you on this. I cannot speak for individuals, however. If you infringe on a diamond ranker’s personal interests, you might find them getting in your way.”

“Good to know, thank you.”

“Now, we should address some of the issues that stem from your particular situation. Every diamond ranker has their own circumstances, but yours are more drastic than most.”

“In that I’m not actually a diamond ranker.”

“Yes. You straddle the line between mortal and immortal. It is not our place to tell you not to intervene in mortal affairs while you are still a gold ranker. But we also won’t stand aside if you start intervening in mortal affairs using your far-from-mortal aspects.”

“Meaning that you’ll let me extort everyone with the System this one time, but I need to start using my big boy powers like a mature adult.”

“In short, yes. Handle mortal affairs like a mortal and immortal affairs like an immortal. That way, when some monarch asks us to rein you in, we’ll tell them no. And we expect the same consideration from you. Diamond rankers handle their own business amongst themselves. When we drag mortals into our affairs, or let them drag us into theirs, people die. Wars happen. Whole nations are wiped off the map.”

“Everything I’m scared of happening if I misuse my power.”

“Yes. Most of the diamond rankers you’ve met are young. Five centuries old at most. There are gold rankers older than most of them. Soramir Rimaros and Dawn are both exceptions, but both spend most of their time out in the cosmos. If you feel the need for

guidance on how to handle immortal power in a mortal world, I want to be available for you.”

“I’d like that.”

“All this being said, I’m not going to intervene in your business with the Cyrion noble houses. You made that mess on a mortal scale, and you’re expected to clean it up in the same way. No turning into a giant bird and wiping out entire families.”

“That wasn’t the plan, but I’ll keep it in mind.”

Vandrick stood up.

“I think this went well,” he said. “But that is ultimately up to you, and time will tell. If you need me, I’m confident you can find me easily enough. If you come looking for advice, I will be happy to offer it. If you come looking for help, you will find me less willing.”

Jason stood up and shook his hand.

“Understood.”

Chapter 934

A Petty Tyranny

Nine people marched across the bridge towards Jason's cloud palace. They were clearly unlike the people Jason had been negotiating with, although they were from the noble houses currently missing people. These were not articulate servants or refined aristocrats. These were adventurers. Their gear was worn and practical, their weapons carried with the familiarity of years. They were slung ready for use, not displayed for the decorative value of their bejewelled hilts.

They stopped in front of the large doors, which turned into mist and vanished. Behind them was a garden atrium with sunlight spilling from above. In the doorway was the dark figure of Shade.

"What can I do for you, gentlemen?"

"My name Ben Headingway, of House Headingway," the man at the front said, his voice as gruff as his appearance. "Each person here represents a noble house of Cyrion; I think you can guess which ones. We want to speak with Asano."

"Of course, Lord Headingway. Please come in."

"We're not going in there," Ben said. "He has all the power in there."

"If his power in here is your concern, Lord Headingway, I'm afraid you have some bad news coming about out there. I'm sorry we couldn't accommodate you today."

Mist started to form new doors, then dispersed again.

"Hold on, Shade," Jason said as he floated into view from above. "These people are clearly adventurers. Good adventurers don't walk into places filled with unknown power and uncertain threats."

"If that is the metric, Mr Asano, wouldn't that make you a mediocre adven—"

"That will be all, thank you."

"Very good, Mr Asano."

Shade vanished into Jason's shadow as he landed just inside the doors. That placed him right in front of Ben, who was significantly taller. He had the dark skin of a Cyrion native, his long hair woven with beads which Jason could feel radiating magic.

"I hope you're not here to fight," Jason said.

"I don't like fighting other adventurers," Ben said. "I like fighting monsters. Protecting people, providing for my house. Being the foundation holding it up, as my ancestors were before me. But you came into that house, and you took my family away. I don't like fighting

people, especially when there are stories around them like the ones around you. But I will, if that's what it comes to. You took my nephew."

Jason nodded.

"Without admitting to any action on my part, I'm sure you could understand why I might do such a thing."

"I do," Ben acknowledged. "The thing about noble houses is that when they get old enough, most of the people in it start to forget things. Become entitled. Forget that the money and power and influence doesn't come from some inherent greatness they were born with."

He rested a casual hand on his sword hilt.

"It comes from this. From the people willing to get dirty and bloody. To die for the family, if that's what it takes. They forget that if they try to exploit the wrong person, it's people like us who bleed to set things right."

"You see, this is where you're losing me, Ben. Your problem seems to be who your family exploited, not that they were exploiting people at all."

"Ideals are all well and good, but power is what brings about change. Your ideals around slavery, for example, mattered to no one until you took away the System."

"I can't argue with that."

"Then let us set aside wishful thinking and deal with the practicalities. Our families thought they could extract some cheap benefits from you. They were wrong, and paid the price for that. As we speak, all of our families are absolving the contracts for the people from your world. We're even giving them generous severance bonuses."

"Yeah, I can see the warm glow of having done the right thing radiating out of you."

"Asano, you know that we won't back down until our people are returned to us. You took them, leaving only two things: a letter from you and poisoned food that would render them unconscious, rather than kill them. You wanted us to know they were alive and that you took them."

"Allegedly."

"I'm not here for games, Asano, or the cheap words of politicians. I don't want to fight someone like you, but we will not allow you to keep our people. You are powerful, and have powerful friends. But you have made a lot of enemies by taking away the System, and the noble houses of Cyrion also have many connections. If we move against you in earnest, we will find no shortage of allies."

"You say that like your families won't come looking for revenge after they have their people back."

“You came into our homes and took members of our families.”

“I didn’t start this fight. The people from Earth mean very little to your families. Even though I find the indenture system laws unconscionable, I offered to buy their contracts at more than fair prices. Instead, your families used those laws to hold them hostage. To try and extort me. Because they had the power to do so and, as you said, power is what mattered. In fact, you’ve been right about everything. Ideals accomplish nothing alone, and you did try to exploit the wrong people.”

“We have moved to rectify this situation and make amends. Yes, I am certain that my family will try to make you pay for what you have done. That was inevitable from the moment you chose to do things this way, and you’re smart enough to know that. And that the enmity between us will be very different if our people are not returned. Give them back, and you’ve delivered a political humiliation. Don’t, and you’ve started a war.”

“I honestly don’t have your people,” Jason said. “I did hear something that may be relevant, though. A friend of mine popped over to Sadi Andali recently. She’s very fast, even without portals, and she had a few things to sell off. She heard that some unusual products moving through the slave markets there. What seemed to be aristocrats, from their rank and bearings.”

The people behind Ben stirred, but didn’t speak up. Ben’s gaze became even more flinty, as if it could bore through Jason’s head.

“The Sadi Andali slave markets.”

“That’s what I heard.”

“Which one?”

“Split between them, from what I heard. Not sure which ones, so I suppose you’ll need to hit them all. Simultaneously, or you might find yourself dealing with hostages. You should probably call in some favours from those many connections you mentioned.”

“This is your price, then? The destruction of the Sadi Andali slave trade?”

“I’m sure this won’t stop it. The fact that the country still exists at all tells me that. It’s too convenient a place for powerful people in need of dirty deeds but clean hands. Not that I’d exploit that to make some kind of point. You have a good day, bloke.”

The mist doors reformed, removing Jason from view.

The desert town was a ramshackle place, mostly tents of washed out brown and yellow, pitched alongside a river. Some crude mud brick buildings were scattered around, and a few large colourful tents stood out from the others. The town was never meant to last, and the people in it were clearly used to adventurer raids. Those that could, fled. The

slaves would normally refuse to go through portals with rescue at hand, but few could tolerate the pain collars.

Ben watched the adventurers swarm over the town. This was not his first time on such a raid, and he knew the routine just as well as the residents. Asano was right about the long-term efficacy of the operation. Even hitting every slave market in the tiny nation at once would only slow them down, ultimately stopping nothing.

There were churches here, although the nomadic nature of the town meant they were not actually sanctified. These were the larger and more colourful tents, not holy ground or, in most cases, unholy ground. Dark gods, their temples hidden away in civilised society, were openly worshipped here. They could flaunt their existence, at least until adventurers came calling. Even then, the clergy mostly escaped. The dark gods made sure that their thralls were elusive.

Not every church tent belonged to a dark god. Deities like Strength and Desolate weren't considered evil, but didn't care about the morality of their followers. There was an agreement with such churches that they wouldn't shelter residents during adventurer raids. In turn, the adventurers would leave their tents in peace. Most such churches were of lesser gods, the exception being a bright red tent in a prime position upstream.

The operation was largely wrapped up, with none of the family members found. Ben made his way to the large red tent, as it never hurt to pay respects to Dominion. To his surprise, he sensed a gold-rank presence within. He was clearly sensed in turn as a priest came out to meet him.

"Priest," Ben said in greeting, not knowing the man's name. "I am Benjamin Headingway, of House Headingway."

"I have heard of you. I am Brian, priest of Dominion."

"What is such a high-ranking priest doing in this place?"

Brian let out a chuckle.

"Our church is an organisation built more on doing what you're told than asking why."

"We are seeking members of the noble houses who have supposedly been sold here."

"I thought it might be something like that. As it happens, I did come across a noble slave in the market here."

"Do you know what happened to them?"

"I do. I suspected that something like this might happen, and that it would be best to keep him safe until someone like you arrived. So, I bought him."

"You bought him?"

“Yes. He’s inside.”

Brian gestured in the direction of the tent.

“Please.”

Ben followed Brian into the tent. While the rich, crimson fabric of the tent was enchanted against sun bleaching, the interior was plain and functional. There was an altar with kneeling mats set out in front of it, and a private living area, sectioned off with standing screens. Off to the side was a thick wooden post, driven into the hard earth floor. Ben could sense the reinforcement magic that prevented the man chained to it from freeing himself with silver-rank strength.

Ben recognised Patterson Kennington. They had no acquaintance, but all of the rescue teams had been shown images of the targets. He was on his knees, forced into hugging the post with his arms chained together on the other side of it. He was unconscious, slumped against the wooden pole.

“You left him like this?” ben asked.

“He’s a slave, and a disobedient one at that. Most owners faced with a slave like this would whip him and throw him in a hole until he learned his place. By disobedient slave standards, this is downright palatial.”

“He’s not a slave; he is a nobleman of Estercost.”

“I think you’ll find, Lord Headingway, that slavery isn’t a volunteer position. If someone has the power to make you one, you are one, and you don’t get a say in the matter. It’s not fair, but while ideals are all well and good, it is power that brings about change.”

Ben’s gaze snapped from Patterson to Brian.

“Asano set this all up,” he realised. “Even this, and you.”

“I’m sure I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Why would your church agree to be lackeys to Asano? Isn’t Slavery a subordinate god to yours? Why would you work with someone working to destroy it?”

“The irony of our church, Lord Headingway, is that those most favoured by our god will never be in it. We guide them, and sometimes we serve them. I am a priest of Dominion. We do not venerate power itself, but the establishment of power over others. Rulership. The exercising of authority. Yes, slavery is one form of power and control, but it is small thing. A petty tyranny. My lord looks higher.”

“Higher?”

“Look at what’s happening out there, and all across Sadi Andali. Someone has set the great and noble houses of Cyrion dancing to his tune.”

“You truly think that Asano is so grand?”

“I never said a name.”

Ben snorted derision.

“If he’s so great, why play political games? He has what he wanted. Why make enemies by humiliating us like this?”

“Because you tried to put him in his place. He no longer has time to educate small concerns like you, one at a time. He is busy figuring out how to not conquer a world. My god values that far more than auctioning off shackled victims. Speaking of which, will you be taking this slave?”

“Of course I will.”

“Excellent. Will you pay in spirit coins, or a promissory note to the church?”

Chapter 935

Reason Eighty-Seven

Duke Percival Headingway was the patriarch of House Headingway, holder of the family's highest title. While the same title was claimed by rural aristocrats in their remote city states, his title came from Cyrion, the heart of civilisation. He might serve under the throne, unlike the city-state rulers, but his power dwarfed even the most prestigious of theirs.

It was galling, then, that one man had been leading his prestigious house around by the nose. Once the problems had escalated to his personal attention, he had not liked what he found. If the issue was external aggression, that would be one thing. He could mobilise the power and influence of the house without impacting its reputation. Instead, some of the family's lesser lights had aggravated a man who didn't blink when gods became his enemies.

As with any noble family, the true power of House Headingway came from their adventurers. Politics were unquestionably important, but lesser affairs could be left to lesser family members. In this case, however, those lesser members had shoved the family's arm shoulder deep into a snake hole.

It could have been worse, Percival reflected. Asano was serving up humiliation in forcing the families to rescue their errant members, in very public fashion. But while they had been roughed up, he made sure the Dominion church kept them from any genuine danger.

From what Percival had seen of young Garret, the experience may have even knocked some sense into the boy. When Percival was young, adventurer training had been mandatory in the family. Only those with talent and inclination followed through, but it helped them understand the foundations of what made the houses strong. It might be time to bring the practice back.

The loss of reputation from these events was unpleasant, but far from unendurable. Enough of the major families had shared the same fate that the tide was lowered for everyone. The smart move was to move on, which was exactly what Ben, the family's top gold ranker had said.

"We started something with someone we shouldn't and took our lumps. Take the lesson and move on."

That was exactly what Percival intended, but a faction within the family were advocating retribution. These were the pure politicians, the kind who hated the influence of

the adventurers. They weren't complete fools, now believing they knew who they were dealing with in Asano. They wanted the response to be proportional and political; not making a true enemy but making it clear that House Headingway was not to be trifled with.

Percival knew full well that they were wrong. Asano was an adventurer and he thought like one. Political games only worked so long as the opponent was unwilling to flip the board, and Asano was demonstrably willing to do that. Even if the family could hurt Asano, they would only end up dragging each other down.

He was drafting an announcement on the issue for a family meeting when his office was intruded upon. Mariska Headingway managed the family's business affairs and, in most instances, was the epitome of formality, politeness and respect. She burst through his office door like a siege engine.

"Percy, are you out of your gods-damned mind? You were the one who pushed for the expansion of our trade operations using the sky link system."

"Yes, Mary, I am. Hello, by the way, and do feel free to come in. Maybe treat yourself to some context."

"Do you know who invented the sky link system? And who operates it?"

"I don't recall who invented it. It's managed by the Magic Research Association, is it not?"

"Yes," Mariska said pointedly. "It is."

Her sharp gaze bored into him as she waiting for him to connect the dots.

"Oh," he said. "The Magic Research Association was founded and is now led by a member of Team Biscuit."

"Oh, it doesn't stop there," Mariska said, growing increasingly manic. "Did you know that one of the developers of the sky link system is right here in Cyrion? She's travelling with her very close friend, Jason Asano."

"Ah."

"And here's the topper, Percy. The other founder, Travis Noble, lives in Rimaros, but is not from there originally. Do you want to guess where he's from?"

"Just spit it out, Mary."

"He's not from Pallimustus at all. He's an outworlder. From the group who arrived here fifteen years ago. The group our illustrious family decided would be good leverage to extort a man WHO BLOWS UP CITIES! Not a metaphor, Percy! He literally blew up a city last month. Not the first, by the way. And he did it by accident. Someone assassinated him and his power went out of control and wiped out a city. Then he came back to life, turned into a bird and killed an entire army of messengers! I'd say that's the most insane thing I've

ever heard of, but I've been reading about the rest of the things he's done! And we thought what? Let's *really* make him angry in return for some very minor gains?"

"Mary, I—"

"Do you know what it takes to have Undeath see you as a personal antagonist?"

"Mary—"

"I do. Now. You blow up a city full of his people, Percy. Priests, an undead army, even his damn avatar. You wipe it out of reality and build a new city out of clouds, because at that point, why not? On the way to your office, I heard people talking about getting this guy back. Get him back? What we need to get him is a gift basket and the ten best doxies in Cyrior! Do you know if he likes men or women?"

"We're not hiring prostitutes, Mary."

She gave him a flat look.

"Not for this," he amended.

"Percy, you don't know this, it being a day-to-day operations matter, but I've been trying to get a personal sky link call with Travis Noble for several months. To discuss a special rate on sky link services, given how large and early a customer we've been. And, of course, due to the prestige of associating our name with the service. Funnily enough, Percival, I finally got that call. And he had some very specific ideas about a special rate for our family. Should, and I quote, 'the Sky Link company decides that continuing a relationship with House Headingway is appropriate going forward.' You know what that means, Percy?"

"That they're threatening to cut us off."

"No, Percy, they're giving us reason eighty-seven why you don't fuck with Jason Asano. Losing the System was already an issue, but we aren't the Adventure Society; we can live without it. If we lose the sky link, though, we'll have to downsize our business infrastructure."

"There's still the water link system."

"Percy, we beat out the competition by jumping on the potential of the sky link while everyone else was afraid to take the risk, sticking with the water link. That's how we surged ahead over the last decade."

"How badly will it hurt us? Are we overexposed on this?"

"It won't be a collapse. We've been aggressive with our expansion, but I've always made allowances for an eventuality like this. What it will mean is winding down a lot of operation. Basically, we'll be winding back the clock to where we were ten years ago."

"Which we do not want."

“No, Percy, we do not. You need to shut down this continued antagonism of Asano and the outworlders.”

Percival pushed the sheet of paper on the desk in front of him forward for Mariska to see. She span it around and started reading.

“What is this?” she asked.

“The draft of my announcement to the family that we will be explicitly avoiding any continued antagonism towards Jason Asano.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this when I came in? You could have saved me from yelling about prostitutes.”

“Well, if you don’t like the family announcement approach, Mary, we could try your gift basket and prostitute idea.”

“I was kidding about the doxies, Percy.”

Jason watched the man guiding Shade as he piloted the cloud ship out of Cyrion.

“You seem nervous,” Jason told him. “Are you up to something?”

He turned pale.

“No, sir. My supervisor was very explicit about getting this right.”

“Well, calm down, bloke. You want some fruit? Someone gave me a fruit basket and I haven’t seen most of the stuff in it before. There’s this thing called a prappas, you ever see one of those?”

“Uh, yes, sir. They grow them to the east of here.”

“Do you like them?”

“I find the texture rather odd.”

“I know, right? It’s kind of halfway between a pear and a pineapple. I’m not sure if I love it or hate it yet, but I’m definitely not ambivalent about it.”

Jason’s cloud ship had a larger passenger manifest than previous trips, due to the people from Earth. As the vessel was the size of a cruise ship, it wasn’t hard to accommodate them. Fifty-three people had signed up for the return to Earth in Cyrion. After that, the crowds surrounding the cloud palace became more trouble than they were worth, harassing anyone who came by. A new rendezvous was set up in another city, small and quiet, in the mountains to the north.

This would be one of a series of stops to pick up earthlings. Li Mei had done a good job of tracking and reaching out to those who, like herself, had long ago left Cyrion. With the aid of Farrah and the sky link system, she had arranged several centralised pickup

points. The total returning to Earth, assuming everyone turned up, would be seventy four. That left around thirty who had no interest in returning, couldn't be found, or were dead.

Darryl was an anomaly amongst the outworlders who had been pulled to Pallimustus from Earth. He was, to his knowledge, the only one who wasn't an essence user. A troll were-crocodile from the rainforests of Far North Queensland, he was a member of the Cabal. His trollish fae blood let him shapeshift into a form that could pass for human, especially in rural pubs. Disguise was less of a requirement on Pallimustus, one of the reasons he liked it. He'd been uncertain about a potential return to Earth, not sure if he could fit in any longer.

It was a talk with Jason Asano himself that had turned him around. Speaking over the sky link network, Asano told him about magic on Earth being much more open than after the reveal. The Cabal held sway in large parts of the world, with its members able to operate out in the open. Darryl was quite happy with this, and Asano even apologised on finding out his living-under-a-bridge joke was racist.

The mountain city he was in had a large sky port, relative to its size. Specialty airships that could only run in high-magic zones were a signature of Estercost, and approaching the city by land was difficult. That hadn't stopped Darryl, his physique more powerful than most essence users of his rank.

Unlike most of the Earth refugees, Darryl hadn't been hindered by ranking up with monster cores. He naturally grew more powerful, only the weak ambient magic of Earth having held him back. He had gone from barely silver rank fifteen years ago to pushing against the gates of gold. Unfortunately, his progress had slowed and he wasn't sure why.

The bottleneck in his growth was what had ultimately turned Darryl around about joining those returning to Earth. The magic there was reportedly higher now, but it was the proximity to Asano and his team that Darryl wanted. He'd never built up the connections in Pallimustus that would get him access to magical knowledge, while Asano's friends were famous. He hoped that they would be able to help his breakthrough to gold.

There was a group of people from Earth gathered at a tavern near the sky port. Darryl had spoken with them briefly, before sitting alone. Aside from not being an essence user, they had only known the Cabal as a sinister and mysterious group. At the time they had all been pulled to Earth, the vampire lords were only beginning to schism from the Cabal.

They all moved together, however, when a commotion started outside. It sounded like the sort of panic that arose from a monster attack. The earthlings, along with various others in the bar, moved outside to look. It didn't take long to see that the attack was

coming from above. A group of the city's adventurers had intercepted some flying monsters before they could attack the sky port. They now clashed in the air over the side of the mountain, a vast drop below them.

The monsters had the shape of dragons, each around the size of a school bus. Rather than living things, however, their bodies were chunks of rock, tethered together by arcs of electricity. They almost looked like fossil displays in a museum. Some of the people from the bar took to the skies, either on devices or through their own power. Some were escaping the fight while others were rushing to help. The people from Earth remained grounded, observing as they stood outside the tavern.

"Storm drakes," Darryl said. "We should help."

"Bugger that," one of the essence users said, his accent marking him as a fellow Australian.

"Yeah, screw that," another said. "I can sense at least one gold rank ranker amongst those things."

"But most are silver," Darryl argued. "And there are a lot of them. The adventurers might not have the numbers."

"Others are going to help," the Australian said. "I'm not getting myself killed right before I finally escape this heretical planet and its false gods."

"False gods?" Someone asked in a New Zealand accent. "I've seen lots of gods. There's a really good bar and grill near the divine square in the town where I've been living. I've seen so many gods there that I'm surprised a god of sausages didn't show up."

The others turned to the newcomer, who hadn't been with them in the tavern. He was a Māori, but much leaner than the famous Taika Williams.

"You're not a core user," the Australian said.

"Nah, mate. I was visiting my mum at the portal site when I got sucked in with everyone else. I trained up here, so no cores."

He looked over at Darryl.

"What's your deal, mate?"

"Troll were-crocodile."

"No bull? That sounds pretty sweet. Want to go fight some weird rock lightning dragons?"

"Hell yes. The name's Darryl."

They shook hands.

"I'm Koa. Can you fly, or will you need a piggyback or something?"

"Oh, I'll manage."

Jason and Humphrey moved onto the bridge of the cloud ship, looking out at the mountain in the distance.

“The sky port should have sent someone by now,” Humphrey said.

“Maybe they don’t do that here, being a smaller city,” Jason suggested.

“The sky port there is still big. Will your aura senses reach from here?”

“Probably,” Jason said, then closed his eyes and concentrated. A moment later, they snapped open.

“Monster attack,” he said. “One gold and a lot of silvers. Looks like adventurers are fighting them off, but I’m guessing they’d appreciate a few more, given the numbers. If that’s alright with you, team leader?”

“Let’s go.”

The cloud vessel approached the rear of the battle at speed. Along with adventurers flying around, several airships were employing their weapons, and the sky port itself had fixed defences. Jason and his companions were arrayed on top of the cloud vessel, those who couldn’t fly inside Onslow’s expanded shell. Nik was included, as most of the foes were silver rank.

“This looks like a mess,” Humphrey said, surveying the chaotic battle. “Port defences, civilians helping, multiple adventuring teams. A small horde of gold-rankers diving in might do more harm than good, especially if we start using the ship weapons. Nik, your specialty is group organisation, right?”

“Yep,” Nik confirmed. “I’m used to jumping in with groups who don’t know me. Want me to start getting this lot in line?”

“Connect me in when you link communication to everyone,” Miguel Ladviv said. “I’ll identify myself as an Adventure Society official and give you organisational authority. It should save time.”

“That’ll definitely help,” Nik said.

“Thank you, Miguel,” Humphrey said.

“I’ll, uh, go back inside and make snacks for when everyone is done,” Jamar said.

“And drinks,” Neil called after him as he left. “I want to see multiple jugs of that fruit punch when we’re done.”

“Hey, look at that,” Jason said. “Is that a giant crocodile man swinging like Tarzan on a rope made of blood, hanging from a lightning dragon in flight?”

“I don’t know,” Danielle said. “Who’s Tarzan?”

A huge grin split Jason's face.

"I have to say it: I love being an adventurer."