

## 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—”

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### **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.
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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.”

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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?”

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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.”