

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 Cyriion! 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."