

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.”