

## 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.

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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.

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“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...”

