

Chapter 912

This Is Not a Cliff

Li Li Mei was rooted to the ground as if a landscaper had planted her there. Her body was rigid, her face locked on the man in front of her. Jason looked more relaxed, but the rigidity of his casual posture told a different story.

“You know this lady?” Belinda asked.

“I do,” he said.

“Does your planet only have seven people on it?” Estella asked. “Why do you know them all?”

“I vaguely recall Taika mentioning that I knew more people amongst the Earth refugees. And that they didn’t join him and Travis because they didn’t want to be sent to me.”

“And they bet on the kindness of strangers over getting help from you?” Estella asked. “How bad is your reputation where you come from?”

“It’s not great,” Jason admitted.

“I can tell by the way she’s looking at you,” Belinda said. “That’s the way sandwiches look at Neil.”

Li Mei remained frozen as Jason wandered closer. He was not a tall man, and stood eye to eye with her.

“Hello, Miss Li. How have you been?”

She finally found her voice.

“You really are alive then?”

“On and off. The people from Earth think I’m dead?”

“Some. I didn’t believe it.”

“Why not?”

“We thought you were crazy, back on Earth. Running around, treating governments and magic factions like they were inconsequential as you did... whatever it was you were doing. You never explained it properly.”

“No one was willing to listen. All any of you heard was the word ‘power’ running through your heads in a loop.”

“It was a time of unprecedented opportunity, or so we thought. Only after I spent time in this world did I realise that we were dogs, fighting over scraps. You were doing things like they do them in this world, because you thrive here. You fit.”

“No, he doesn’t,” Belinda called out. “He’s weird everywhere he goes.”

"It's kind of nice knowing that it's not just here," Estella said.

"It does feel like a vindication of all the things we say about him behind his back."

Jason turned to look at them from under raised eyebrows.

"Do you two mind?"

"No, we're good," Belinda said.

"She's very pretty," Estella observed, drawing an exaggerated look of exasperation from Belinda.

"You are such a skirt chaser. I cannot take you anywhere."

"All I said was that she's pretty."

"I'm standing right here and you're eyeing off other women, right in front of me."

Jason shook his head and turned back to Li Mei.

"Come on," he told her. "We're taking a walk."

Li Mei's storage building was in one of Boko's less reputable areas, a warehouse district far from the gardens and universities.

"The gold rankers in Greenstone," she said. "That was you, obviously."

"Yes," Jason confirmed.

"I heard it was some famous team out of Vitesse."

"My team. I just haven't been on it for a while."

"I never liked following adventurer news. Clearly, I should have been more diligent."

As a foreigner and a small woman moving alone, she'd constantly caught looks as she made her way through the streets, fending off unwanted attention with her aura. Moving through those same streets with Asano was a completely different experience.

"What's going on?" she asked him.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"We're very obvious outsiders here, but people are stepping around us without so much as a glance. It's almost like they're pretending they don't see us."

"They're subconsciously not paying us any attention. If we do something too unusual, they'll notice. And a small number of people respond with aggression and anger instead of getting lulled in."

"You're doing this?"

"It's become a habit. I try to avoid attention when I can, these days. I can stop it, if you like."

"How? Some kind of mind control?"

“I don’t think magic can do that, at least not directly. The soul barrier shields the mind, so you have to use workarounds. Physiologically manipulating the brain, that kind of thing. The goddess of knowledge can’t read minds, but she has access to all knowledge, so she effectively can.”

“Then how?”

“Aura manipulation. I can’t alter their auras, but I can modulate mine to something that most people will instinctively and subconsciously overlook. It’s like how you never look at your habitual surroundings unless something changes and makes it stand out. I’m giving off ‘that chair in the corner you never sit in’ vibes.”

“And you’re doing it for both of us.”

“I first started working on this back on Earth, based on some vampire tricks. I’ve had a lot of practise and training with my aura since then.”

“Now that I’ve seen this world, I can only wonder how much you could have offered us back on Earth. If we’d treated you like a visiting dignitary instead of a commodity to be divided up.”

“My knowledge was limited. Farrah was the one you should have gone after.”

“No offence, Mr Asano, but you were a lot easier to manipulate. She knew to shut up and walk away when she didn’t know something.”

He let out a chuckle.

“You have more knowledge now,” she said. “As do I. You were here for what? A year and a half before going back? I’ve been here ten times that. The things I could do on Earth now. I could change the world.”

“It’s been a long time, Miss Li. The world changed on its own.”

“You have contact with Earth?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“We’re not here for me to answer your questions, Miss Li. We’re here to decide what happens to you now.”

“I didn’t do anything illegal.”

“Pallimustus takes more of a ‘spirit of the law’ approach than Earth does. Which you know, or we wouldn’t have caught you running.”

“And you’ve been given discretionary power over me.”

“If someone had to give it to you, it’s not real power. Especially not in this world. You’ve been left to my discretion because I took that authority, and because no one with

the power to challenge me will do so. Not over you. Which is why I am assuming you chose this low magic zone for your little scheme.”

“It wasn’t that little.”

“A matter of perspective, I suppose.”

“You were like this on Earth, too. Acting as if our concerns were too small for you to bother with on anything but a whim.”

“They were.”

“I realised that, after coming here. But now we’re here, and you’re still acting more important than everyone else.”

“It’s not me that’s important. I have responsibilities.”

“Saving the world again? In an unexplained way, from an indeterminate threat, but trust you, it’s really important?”

“Stop that. You know I like banter, so you’re trying to engage me. Make me like you.”

“Is it working?”

“I’ve had better,” he said, but a smile teased the corners of his mouth. “I’m not going to kill you, Miss Li, or hand you over to the local authorities. As much as I do like the directness of how things are done here, the more discretionary the power, the greater the chance for corruption. This place can be barbaric, and the only check on that is the moral compass of whoever has the power.”

“No world is perfect, I suppose.”

“No. Same for the people in them, even those of us who get to travel to both.”

Their meandering path led out of the warehouse district and into a nicer area, close to a small university campus. The buildings were a mix of sandstone blocks and the region’s signature green brick. There were tall, thin trees, similar to palms. Leafy green plants grew out of pots and alcoves, or dangled from balconies. Water features were prominent, from channels that fed the abundant plant life to fountains placed at road junctions as roundabouts.

“They call this the Oasis City,” Li Mei said. “There are multiple apertures to the water astral space here. Apparently, some cult tried to sabotage them years ago, but they are well guarded, here. The cult had more luck out in the desert, so I’ve heard.”

“They did.”

“You were involved?”

“Peripherally. I was still in training when the big battle took place in the water astral space itself, so I missed out. Which was good, because a lot of people more powerful than me died, including my friend Farrah.”

“This is a different Farrah from the one with you on Earth?”

“No. I died too, later, fighting the being that cult worships. When I came back to life on Earth, some cosmic entities decided that she should as well. They thought there should be at least one person I can trust there.”

“There were a lot of reports, back on Earth. Interviews with people who encountered you. You used to talk off-the-cuff about things so outlandish that we would dismiss them as nonsense. Like coming back from the dead. Now, I realise that at least some of them were true. I’m more credulous than I was, but cosmic beings bringing people back from the dead is a lot, even for this world.”

“Go ask the goddess of death. Her church gave me a certificate to say how many times I’ve died.”

“Isn’t the death god a man?”

“Gods like to keep things flexible in that regard.”

“You say that like you know a lot of gods.”

“How much of this is you pretending not to have exhaustively researched everything you could about me after getting to Pallimustus?”

“I don’t—”

“Your aura reveals your emotions to me, Miss Li. You are doing a remarkable job of hiding your fear, by the way. I used to do that, but I lost the knack. It’s healthier to work through the emotions than bottle them up, believe me.”

“I saw you murder people on television with your mind, Mr Asano. I believe you.”

“Good. Now, enough about me. Tell me about this operation of yours. The local authorities are worried that you’re quietly fundraising an undead army or something.”

“Why would I do that?”

“They don’t know you. They have no idea what you would and wouldn’t do, and the worst-case scenario is always bad on this world. It wasn’t that far from here that a blood cult was trying to summon a world eating leech monster.”

“Don’t you summon a leech monster?”

“He’s a good boy,” he said defensively. “Anyway, the point is that they don’t know what you want because they don’t know you. You were careful about that part.”

“Not careful enough.”

“You were doing quite well, until gold rankers came along. In this part of the world, that’s bringing a bazooka to a knife fight. Belinda and Estella have decades of experience at spying and thieving. Disguise magic too strong for anyone here to see through, and perception that can listen to you from three buildings over. Hardly anyone uses privacy

magic here. Few people have the perception to make it worthwhile, so using a privacy screen here makes you stand out more than whispering in a corner in a big black cloak.”

“*That’s* how they found me? Because I was using a privacy shield?”

“It was a data point. Overall, they were very impressed with how you set everything up. They suggested I hire you.”

“For what?”

“I’m trying to build up a staff, to smooth out my return to Earth. It’s going to get complicated, especially once they think they know how powerful I am.”

“Once they think they know?”

“Best they don’t find out how powerful I actually am.”

“And telling me means either you’re lying and want me to tell them, or you don’t think I’ll be able to.”

A sanguine smile was the only response she got.

“You know that going back to Earth is no small thing, magically. I looked into it.”

“I have better options than most.”

“Any options are better options than most. Messenger magic?”

“Amongst other things, but we’re talking about you. Take me through the basics of your operation.”

“Simple enough. A basic protection racket using disenfranchised workers as my leverage. Wouldn’t work in the cities where the industry associations work a lot like unions. In the remote areas, though, it’s all aristocratic owners and exploited workforces. All I had to do was exploit them better. A town meeting here, a pamphlet there. A few well-placed figureheads who are handy with a rhyming slogan. Did you ever see the episode of *Justified* where Boyd Crowder convinces the townsfolk to sell their land to Mags Bennett?”

“How good was Walton Goggins in that? My sister said he had a tooth essence, of all things. Sorry, what was your point?”

“I paid charismatic people with folksy charm and no morals to convince people to do what I want. I may have also accidentally invented country music here.”

“The good kind? I love me some Dolly Parton or Johnny Cash.”

“No. The kind that panders to the audience with iconic rural imagery to mask an underlying political agenda.”

“Maybe I should hand you over to the Adventure Society. You’re a monster.”

“The point is, I rile people up until they cause trouble, then the families pay me to grease the wheels of industry. I get paid and the locals get some token gesture so they feel like they got a win.”

“You didn’t get pushback from the families?”

“They sent some people to look around. Rough up random people. If they were competent, they wouldn’t be working as thugs for aristocrat families at the bottom of the magical barrel. They quickly realised I was careful enough that paying me would be cheaper than finding me.”

“Is that why you did it here, so close to where I lived? The low grade of industry thug?”

“In a way. What the low magic gets me is an absence of everything that high magic gets me. Do you know what it’s like in a big adventuring city?”

“I do.”

“But not in the same way I do, I suspect. You had proper adventurer training. Powerful connections. It’s different when you’re an untrained core user from another world. In the big cities, that makes you a waste of potential at best and an experimental subject at worst.”

“A big change from your treatment on Earth. Low magic zones gave you some of that back?”

“Yes. I got out of Estercost. The whole country is bubbling with magic. I did some wandering. It was easy enough to pass for an aristocrat from some place no one has heard of, on the outs from my family.”

“You seem to have done alright for yourself.”

“I discovered the advantages of low magic zones. They don’t look down on core users as much, and silver rankers are the peak elites. In places like this, I got some of the respect that I missed from Earth. And once I had that, I could make money.”

“For what? I’ve heard you’re raking it in, but if it’s not to fund a wacky necromancer, what are you doing with it?”

“Did you know that you can buy gold-rank monster cores here?”

“So?”

“So? Do you have any sense of how hard those are to get your hands on back on Earth? They let me look at one once. Through reinforced glass while flanked by armed guards. Here, you can just walk into a trade hall and buy them. It takes an ungodly amount of money, thus, the racket, but you can just buy them. For money!”

“You want to reach gold rank?”

“Who doesn’t want to reach gold rank?”

“Fair enough. You couldn’t find anything more legitimate?”

“Breaking into new markets is hard, and I was no mercantile expert on Earth, let alone this planet. But people, when you get down to it, are always the same. Australian, Chinese, elf, leonid. People are people, rich people are rich people, and they do what rich people do.”

“Exploit poor people.”

“Exactly. I’ve been running this game all over. For years, now, going from one low magic zone to the next. Never pushing too hard, never overextending, and never overstaying my welcome. This isn’t the first time I was heading to a sudden and discreet exit. Just the first time I was caught.”

“It’s not what I’d call moral.”

“There are worse things to do that stir up people with legitimate grievances. I may even have accidentally instigated positive social change, once or twice.”

They were passing by a water fountain with a lot of foot traffic moving around it. There was a wide, slightly damp lip for people to sit, and Jason did so. Li Mei followed suit. He contemplated her words for a while, wondering how much was true and what was a lie. He could read the emotions in her aura, but using that as a lie detector was more complicated than he made out. Which he was certain she knew.

He could read her emotions, but her aura control was very solid now, which it had not been on Earth. She was very good at regimenting how her mind was reflected in her aura, making it harder for an observer to glean information from it. He had to respect that, given that it was a talent he excelled at himself.

He also suspected that her actual mind was as well-organised as her aura, something he had *not* excelled at. She was good at framing the facts in such a way that they pointed where she wanted, instead of at the truth.

“If you came to work for me,” he said, “your loyalty would have to be to me. Not China, not one of the magical factions. Not even my clan, back on Earth. To me.”

“You want to offer me a job?”

“Maybe. Haven’t decided, yet.”

“When I saw you in my storage building, I thought it was the end. The dangers back on Earth were sedate for someone like me. When we met, you were fun, naïve, charming. A little dangerous, but that was exciting. By the time you were killing people with your aura on television, I knew all that was left was dangerous. I thought you were a maniac. Then, I’m about to go on the run and there you are. It felt like I was standing with a cliff at my back, and you were there to push me off. I remember what you were like, back on Earth. At the end. No one knew if you were going to make a joke or snap and kill twenty people.”

“I’ve had a lot of therapy. And I know what it’s like to be desperate and alone, in a world you don’t understand. This is not a cliff, Miss Li, and I’m not trying to push you off.”

“So you say. What if I tell you that I don’t want to work for you?”

“Then you can catch a ride back to Earth with the rest. Any earthlings I can round up. I’ll take you all back to Earth, unless you don’t want to go.”

“I want to go. After everything I’ve seen and learned here? I’m going to have so much money and power it’s obscene.”

“Not interested in working for me, then?”

“Of course I’m interested. In this city, diamond rankers are practically a myth but, from what I hear, they’ve been hanging around you like you’re all golf buddies. I’ve heard that you tend to get caught up in crazy things, but everyone in your orbit is wealthy and famous. Standing next to you is like complaining that the hailstones are made of gold. The only problem I’ll have is getting you to trust me. Because you probably shouldn’t.”

“I’m not promising to take you on, just take you to Earth. But if Stella and Lindy say you’re worth it, I’m not going to ignore that.”

“I’m not going to say yes to that. Or no. If your offer is real, I’d like to talk to some of your people. See what I’m potentially getting into.”

“And I need to look into what you’ve been up to before I make that offer. See what kind of person I...”

She looked at him as he trailed off, looking around with suspicion on his expression.

“Something’s here,” he said and stood up off the side of the fountain. “Something that’s very good at—”

A massive sword blade erupted from his chest.