

Chapter 919

I Know You Can't Control Yourself Any Longer

Li Mei had been hoping to remain forgotten in the aftermath of Boko's destruction. When Boko's population had been sent through a portal to somewhere, most of the non-residents who had been in the city were sent to Greenstone. Blending in with them, she had been trying to find anyone who had used a recording crystal during the events.

Li Mei herself had done so, pulling one out as Jason's power carried her out of the city after he was attacked. She had been far from alone and had managed to buy copies of recordings made by other evacuees. She had a feeling that, if she really did return to Earth, information about Jason Asano would be a richer currency than spirit coins.

Her recordings were taken when the Adventure Society caught up with her. That was the beginning of what they insisted several times was not an interrogation. They met her requests to leave with a strong suggestion that it would be an unhealthy decision for her.

The questioning happened in a blank room, sitting across from a pair of blank-faced Adventure Society investigators. One was a man and the other a woman, Glen and Glennis. Their bland sameness made them seem like brother and sister from a family of career bureaucrats. Even their skin tone was a match for the beige walls.

At first it was the same questions, over and over. What happened when Jason was attacked. Every detail, again and again. What the attacker looked like. What his equipment looked like. What his aura felt like. What did he say?

"I told you, I don't know what he said. Which means he probably wasn't a local. I learn languages very quickly. It's one of my abilities. I can learn a region's languages and dialects in about an hour of people watching at the town market. Which I did here, in Greenstone, even down in Hornis. I don't know the language he used, so I don't think he was from around here."

The questions started shifting away from the events in question and towards Jason in general. It started obliquely, but it was obvious they were edging towards something else. She stonewalled, pushing back on the relevance of their questions while trying to figure out what they were after. They were starting to get pushy when a dark figure rose from her shadow.

"That is as far as Mr Asano will allow you to take this," the shadow creature said.

"Miss Li will be leaving now."

"You're his familiar," said Glen, the male investigator.

"I am. You may address me as Shade. It is a mononym."

“What we do with witnesses is not for Jason Asano to decide,” Glennis said. “It’s certainly not for him to send his familiar with instructions for us. If he wants to come down here and say something, he can.”

“If that is what you wish,” Shade said. “Mr Asano will come here and deal with you personally.”

“Uh...” Glen said, throwing glances at Glennis.

“Well, I mean, he can’t,” Glennis said. “Not *here*, here. This section of the building is dimensionally warded. He’ll have to go to administration and talk to...”

She trailed off as an obsidian archway rose from the floor.

“That’s a portal arch, right?” Glen said.

“It’s *his* portal arch,” Glennis responded.

“How can he open a portal in here?”

“He can’t. I don’t think.”

“He doesn’t seem to agree. How strong is that dimensional warding?”

The pair looked at the empty arch.

“Probably not that strong,” Glennis said. “This isn’t the high security wing, and you know how barren the magic is in this city. Apparently not strong enough to stop a gold ranker. Or whatever Asano is.”

“Given that his response to being assassinated was to turn into a bird and kill an army, I don’t imagine some moderate anti-portal magic is going to stop him.”

The empty arched flared to life, filling with shadowy energy, roiling erratically. Glen turned to look at Shade.

“When you said he was going to ‘deal with us,’ what exactly did you mean?”

Jason stepped out of the shadowy arch. He smiled and grabbed Glen’s hand to shake it, despite it not being offered.

“Mr Costling. I appreciate the diligence you and your cousin have shown in your rigorous investigation of last week’s events. Unfortunately, I now need to take Miss Li with me. But again, I appreciate your diligence.”

“We can’t just...”

Glennis’ words trailed off as Jason turned to look directly at her. His expression had a friendly smile and kind eyes, yet it left the hair on her arms standing on end. He held her gaze for a long, silent moment before breaking eye contact before turning back to Li Mei.

“Through the portal, Miss Li. If you would.”

Li Mei emerged from the portal into what had to be Jason's famous cloud building. She looked up and down the hall while Jason exited the portal and it closed behind him. They were in a tunnel of fog, circular and wispy, with sky blue carpet running along the floor. There were clear patches, like windows, that could be seen through, and she moved to the closest one.

Neither wind nor sea spray came through what looked like a hole in the wall, despite a raging ocean outside. Waves pounded against the walls of fairytale cloud castles, floating on the open sea. The fluffy white buildings didn't budge, in spite of the churning waters crashing into the walls. At water level, the buildings were connected by a flooded layer of flat cloud. Passage between the castles was achieved through a series of connecting sky bridges, one of which they currently occupied.

"Where are we?"

"I set up my cloud palace offshore from Greenstone. You can see it from the city if you fly over it."

She could hear music coming from down the hall and Jason made an inviting gesture in that direction.

"Is that... Gloria Estefan?"

Jason led her down the tunnel and into a large room. It looked something like an open plan loft, laid out into sections. The furniture was a mix of the dense cloud substance and more traditional materials like wood and marble. The largest areas had multiple couches and armchairs, enough for a dozen people. They were arrayed around a large square coffee table, currently covered in notebooks and loose papers.

The music was coming from that area, a recording crystal projection of Miami Sound Machine floating below the high ceiling. The man and woman talking as they went over the notes on the table has the shimmer of a privacy screen around them, probably to dampen the noise right over their heads.

There was a long dining table in another area, also occupied by two people. One was a staggeringly beautiful woman, even by gold rank standards, with copper hair and eyes that marked her as a celestine. She was sharing a sandwich the length of her arm with a husky elf in what looked like an ugly Christmas sweater.

Multiple tables were central to a third area, where most of the people were. The tables had what looked like board games from Earth, and she watched Jason groan at the result of a dice roll.

"This is why I hate dice-based combat. You can do everything right and still get gutted like a fish."

The last area was the kitchen, where two people were dancing to the music as they made food. Alongside Jason was a woman Li Mei recognised, Farrah Hurin. Li Mei looked from the Jason playing a game to the Jason cooking and dancing to the Jason standing beside her in the doorway.

“The cloud palace is my domain,” he said. “I can express more of my power here.”

“Which one is the real you?”

“None of them. This body is the closest, though. The others can’t leave here.”

She stared at him for a moment, the back at the group laughing and enjoying one another’s company.

“I don’t wish to be indelicate,” she said, “but you’re having a party?”

“You’re wondering why we’re celebrating when so many people just died.”

“I am.”

He nodded and led her over to the lounge area. He nodded to the man and woman in their privacy screen and claimed a couch. Li Mei joined him, leaving a space between them. The air shimmered around them and the music was reduced to a muffled background noise.

“I can’t speak for you,” he said, “but everyone else in this room has mourned those they failed to save. Too many times, and there will be too many more. We’ve had days to be maudlin, and we were. But we also have to pick ourselves up and try to save the next people who fall into danger. If we let it grind us down... well, you’re from Earth. You saw what I was like. At the end of my time there.”

“I did.”

“That is not a good place to be. If I had the power I had now, but was in the mental state I was then, the people here would hunt me down. And they would be right to do so. We’re powerful enough now that we can’t afford to be unstable. We can do too much damage. So, we have to take care of ourselves, mind, body and soul.”

He looked around the room with a smile.

“And we need to take the wins where we can get them,” he continued. “Yes, a city was lost. The social and economic ramifications of that will be continent wide and linger for decades. A home for ninety thousand, and a regional economy, gone in minutes. For many, they lost everything they ever knew. But something like ninety-eight percent of the population got out alive. The messengers sent an army, but we had zero combatant casualties and a civilian survival rate that is astounding, given how suddenly it all happened.”

He gave her a sad smile.

“It’s easy to dwell on our failures, but we need to celebrate what we accomplished as well. We’re not going to be dancing around in front of the people who lost family, friends and homes. But here, when it’s just us? We were sad yesterday and we can be sad again tomorrow. Today, we’re going to be happy. Now, let’s get something to eat.”

In the kitchen, Farrah glanced over at Jason’s prime avatar chatting with Li Mei.

“She’s pretty,” she observed to the avatar cooking with her.

“I’m aware,” Jason said.

“How aware?”

“It’s not like that.”

“You brought her in here.”

“She’s from Earth.”

“We found her while looking for someone doing sketchy stuff, Jason. And it was her. She was doing the sketchy stuff.”

“We’ve done worse. If I look back at when I came to this world, there were challenges, yes. But in a lot of ways, it bent over backwards to give me the opportunities I needed to get where I am now. She arrived with little knowledge, little training and already dosed up on monster cores, so no one was going to help her change that. She didn’t have you, Rufus and Gary to put her on a right path. That she’s managed to self-start like this? Work towards earning the cores to actually reach gold rank on her own?”

“She manipulated people. Fomented trouble amongst those who already have a history of doing terrible things.”

“I’ve manipulated people too. Hurt people. Killed people. Out of pride and vanity. Too arrogant to look for a better way. If I can forgive myself for that much, I can forgive her for less. If we give her better opportunities, I think she’ll do better. Be better. It worked on me.”

“You know China didn’t send someone who looks like her to you by accident. Just because you didn’t fall into the honey trap then, it doesn’t mean you won’t now.”

“That was almost twenty years ago.”

“And she looks exactly the same.”

“There’s no honey trap here.”

“Uh huh.”

“There’s no point to a honey trap. We’re gold rank. Everyone we meet is crazy hot.”

“You’re saying that she’s crazy hot?”

“Of course she is. Denying it would be stupid.”

“Well, there you go.”

“No, I don’t go. There’s no going.”

“Uh huh.”

“Stop that.”

“I’m just saying.”

“I know what you’re saying.”

“That your judgement isn’t always the best.”

“My judgement is fine. You’re acting like I’m James Bonding my way across Pallimustus.”

“There was that time you went off to ‘train your aura’ by sleazing on women.”

“I was not sleazing on women. And that’s a legitimate way to practise aura refinement. Using techniques I learned from the little black book of sex magic that you gave me, by the way.”

“Uh huh.”

“Will you stop saying that?”

“She’s very pretty.”

“Go back to chopping your vegetables.”

The Continental Council’s chief inspector reminded Jason of Rufus, with his dark skin, bald head and looks that stood out, even at gold rank.

“Chief Inspector Krensler,” Jason greeted him, shaking his hand.

They were standing in one of the Greenstone Adventure Society’s marshalling yards.

“Are you ready, Chief Inspector?”

“I am.”

Jason opened a portal to his soul realm and they stepped through. On the other side was the flat roof of a tower made from sandstone brick and green stone. It was the highest point of the city that now housed the population of Boko, offering an impressive view. The same construction materials could be seen all over, dotted with water features and painted with greenery. Artificial waterfalls spilled out of buildings as much as five storeys up, splashing into palm groves and garden-lined streets. The buildings themselves were overgrown with lush, leafy vines.

“Where did an empty city like this come from?” Krensler asked.

“I made it.”

Krensler looked at him, then back out over the city.

“When?”

“A few days ago, when it was needed.”

“Just like that?”

“You stand in the heart of my domain, Chief Inspector. Surely you’ve heard about astral kingdoms, and the fact that I have one. The power your investigators are so curious about comes from here.”

“As best we can tell, that celestial phoenix creature displayed god level power. Rising to wipe out the messengers like that was, for all intents and purposes, a miracle.”

“Is that so?” Jason said noncommittally not turning his gaze from the city below.

“We aren’t officially commenting on your identity in this, but anyone with any connections will find out easily enough.”

“I appreciate the society’s discretion.”

“There is the open question of where that power came from.”

“I just told you, Chief Inspector. You’re standing in it. This pocket universe is the source of my power.”

“We don’t know a lot about astral kingdoms. We do know they are what the messenger leadership has, which raises more questions about your possession of one. We’d like to know a lot more.”

“I imagine you would, but I have no interest in advertising any potential strengths and weaknesses.”

“You do have weaknesses, then.”

“What is the Adventure Society’s stance on me going to be?”

“The star ranking system gets a little unclear at gold rank. Gold rankers are more autonomous, with missions being handed out by liaisons more often than being posted in the Jobs Hall. There’s often an urgency to gold-rank missions not reflected in most of lower-rank. Even so, the star ranking system is still in effect. A gold will often go through a jobs hall and clear out the older contracts that no one else was taking. We like it when they do that, but they need to adhere to their star ranking. Few gold rankers are one star. Two or three is the norm, as most who reach that point are already experienced in delicate affairs.”

“I imagine I’ll be getting three stars? I know my diplomacy needs work, but I deal with kings and diamond-rankers a lot. Things above them, too, but that’s more my thing. The society just gets in the way at that point, which I suppose is where most of our problems start.”

“We’ve noticed,” Krensler said wryly. Jason snorted a laugh.

“To be honest, Mr Asano, there has been a debate as to whether you even belong on the roster. The goodwill you’ve earned since your return has done a lot to swing things

your way. Your team's efforts in following society directives in your strikes against the messengers have been greatly appreciated. And now it seems that you've removed something like a quarter of the world's messenger forces, liberating countless regions in the process. I want you to know that we aren't overlooking that and just grubbing after the power you displayed in Boko."

"Good to know. But I'm guessing a lot of powerful people are nervous about what happens when I'm not being such a good boy."

"They are. You disappeared a city full of people into the same hole as all those departed messengers."

"The messengers are on a separate planet."

"A lot of influential people have questions. What is happening with those messengers? When will you return the people of Boko?"

"That's why we're here, Chef Inspector. For you to talk with the people of Boko. They're free to come and go as they please."

"It's more complicated than that."

"Isn't it always?"

Krensler took out a small box and handed it to Jason. Jason opened it to find a new Adventure Society badge, gold, but with a diamond symbol where there would normally be one, two or three stars.

"We've decided to treat you by diamond-ranker rules. You've been acting like one for long enough, and it might cover some of the issues we keep having when interacting with you. Soramir Rimaros suggested this, back when. We resisted when you were silver rank, but you're gold now. More importantly, we've been informed that the diamond-rank community has more or less accepted you. It seems foolish to resist, at this stage."

"What are the diamond-rank rules?"

"Similar to gold rank, but with what amounts to full autonomy. If you tell us to pay attention to something, we do. And when the big stuff happens, there is an expectation that you will step forward. If you need to be reined in, it won't be us coming for you, it'll be diamond rankers."

"You said there was a suggestion of removing my membership?"

"There was."

Jason ran his fingers gently over the badge.

"Thank you, Chief Inspector. I know that I haven't always been the easiest member to deal with, but my identity as an adventurer is extremely important to me. I've been through

a lot, and come close to losing myself more than once. Being an adventurer was always an important anchor for me.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

Jason put the lid back on the box and put it in his inventory.

“Well,” he said. “Let’s go meet the Duke of Boko and talk about when the population will be leaving.”

“Looking at this place, I’m not sure they’ll want to.”

“I did my best, Chief Inspector. But I can never replace what they lost.”

“No, I suppose not.”