

## Chapter 912

### Posturing Children

“Let’s assume,” Jason told Elspeth, “that someone from Earth is pulling the strings. There were a bunch of them in Estercost and I left them twisting in the wind for years. It only makes sense that they’ve gone out and started doing things. But, even assuming that someone from Earth is your problem, my being from Earth too doesn’t solve it.”

He sighed, then sipped at his tea appreciatively.

“You know, Greenstone really does have the best tea I’ve had in Pallimustus.”

“We’re not here to talk about tea.”

“That’s a shame,” he said, and set his teacup down with a regretful glance. “I was enjoying making purely social calls lately.”

“Asano…”

He groaned.

“Director, let’s take a look at your situation. The Ustei tribesmen who came south during my time here in Greenstone predate the arrival of more people from Earth by what? Three years, give or take? Assuming that there is someone manipulating this movement of yours, and further assuming that they’re from Earth, this means that they inserted themselves into an existing situation.”

“The violent ones aren’t the issue. Those we can just deal with. It’s the groups that are building up, growing their influence amongst the population, but not taking any violent action. They’re digging into the small rural communities. Influencing the populace and putting their own people into positions of local authority.”

“And that’s your real problem. Hidden powers moving in secret to manipulate one or more grassroots movements. The movements themselves aren’t aware that they are slowly but surely being twisted to serve the very forces they believe they stand against. This happens in my world across the political spectrum.”

“What do we do about it?”

“I don’t know.”

“How do they deal with this issue on Earth?”

“Most with sensationalist journalism and calling each other Hitler on the internet.”

“What?”

“We don’t, Director, and that’s your problem. If we knew how to stop it, we would.”

“You’re saying you can’t help.”

“No, I’m not. Your hidden influencers, we can probably deal with. My group includes some people who excel at infiltration and information gathering. They can probably root out your masterminds, and then I’ll deal with it, if they are from Earth. If not, we’ll leave them to you. That will stop whatever agenda they have, but that doesn’t solve your larger issue.”

“Which is?”

“Whoever you’re after didn’t invent these groups. They came in and made use of what was already there. You delete the person behind the scenes, the groups themselves won’t even notice. They’re going to keep winning hearts and minds in all these small towns and villages. The places where people with power and money only visit if they absolutely have to. Those groups rose up for a reason. You’re going to be dealing with them until the reasons they formed in the first place get addressed.”

“I have no problem with these groups existing. That’s for the Dukes to deal with. My concern is someone using this movement to fund things the Adventure Society has to deal with. Red Table cultists, restricted essence research, messenger collaboration. Things that get a lot harder to stamp out if we don’t catch them early.”

“That’s all well and good, Director, but whoever is manipulating these people is an opportunist. We can get rid of them, fine, but if the opportunity is still there, you’re just going to get someone else moving in. This is a very Earth-style operation they’re running, but there’s no reason someone from this world can’t do it. Especially now that someone has demonstrated how.”

“I’m not responsible for unhappy low rankers.”

“Then don’t do anything. Spend the rest of your career cleaning out maggots because you refuse to remove the rot.”

“What exactly are you suggesting?”

“Oh, I’ve got my own political mess to walk into, back on Earth. You can sort this one out. But, maybe try asking these people what they want, instead of telling them they don’t matter and to shut up.”

“That’s not what we’re doing.”

“Yes, it is. You think these people don’t have power because they can’t throw lightning or breathe fire. They can’t rise up in violence, but they can down tools in protest. What happens if all the quarry workers and spirit coin farmers stop working?”

“The families who own the quarries and farms get more workers.”

“Oh, come on, Elspeth. You’re too smart not to see where that road goes, long term. It just keeps getting worse, and how long can Greenstone’s export economy survive like

that? Once supply interruptions become a regular thing, trade partners start looking for more reliable alternatives.”

“Still not my problem.”

“Then stand by and watch the city die. I’ll be long gone.”

Elsbeth scowled, picked up a scone and shoved it in her mouth, chewing angrily.

“Elsbeth, I’m not trying to tell you how to approach social change. I’ve figured out that I’m really bad at it. But maybe try to convince the Duke to sit down with some of these people. Find out what they want and maybe even think about giving it to them. It’s probably not that much.”

Elsbeth finished her scone, looking slightly embarrassed as she wiped the cream from around her mouth.

“You missed a bit on your chin,” Jason said. “No, the other side. Yeah, that’s it.”

She put down her napkin and sighed.

“So,” she said. “That was the famous Jason Asano ‘change everything about your society’ speech, was it?”

“I suppose it was. Look, I did one semester of political science before dropping out over a girl, so my expertise is limited.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“It means that I once learned just enough to be wrong about a lot of things. But sometimes, when you have power, you have to deal with those things anyway. Despite your insistence that this is the Duke’s problem, I think you know that.”

“I do,” Elsbeth conceded.

“I have my own mess that I’ll be walking into on Earth. I’m trying to find people who can help me not make a giant mess of things.”

“Geller?”

“Amongst others, hopefully. I think you would be a good fit, but while you have the political acumen, I wouldn’t trust you to make moral choices. I’ve done terrible things, out of anger, frustration or ignorance, but I’ve always regretted them. You do them out of cold calculation.”

“This is about the Wexler girl.”

“You don’t sell people to twisted deviants, Director, however much doing so might advantage you.”

“Not all of us get to waltz through life with gods and high rankers giving us special treatment, Asano. Some of us have to fight and scrape for every little thing we get. Not everyone gets to walk the easy road and have things just handed to them.”

Jason smiled.

“Do you remember, back when I was iron rank, and I didn’t give much of a care for what rank difference meant you could say to someone?”

“How could I forget?”

“You should be very grateful that, for all that I have changed since then, that has remained the same.”

He stood up.

“I’ll find your masterminds, Director. If they’re from Earth, I’ll deal with them myself.”

“You said that before. You should hand them over to the Adventure Society.”

“I tried that once, Director. You sold them to a pervert.”

“And your hands are clean, are they? I remember someone who murdered five Adventure Society members, not that far from where we’re sitting.”

“My hands are filthy, Director. But at least I try.”

“So? It’s results that matter, Asano. Trying doesn’t matter a damn.”

He sighed.

“I don’t think anything productive will come from us continuing this conversation.”

“Agreed. Are you still willing to loan me those infiltration and information experts you mentioned? The only ones we field here in Greenstone belong to the aristocratic families, and are deployed against each other. They aren’t up to something on this level. I checked.”

“I set them to work about ten minutes ago.”

“While we were talking?”

“You aren’t worth my undivided attention, Director.”

She also stood up.

“I’m going to regret you coming back to my city, aren’t I?”

“You don’t already?”

“I suppose I do.”

\*\*\*

Li Li Mei loved Boko. It was a beautiful city, filled with gorgeous architecture and wondrous gardens. She was going to miss it. Someone was looking for her, and had gotten far too close before she noticed. Despite the go-betweens, cut-outs and false identities, someone was zeroing in on her. For weeks they’d been digging their way through her layers of protection, and she only noticed now through sheer luck. Whoever it was, they were extremely good at what they did.

Her decision to abandon the entire undertaking was immediate and without hesitation. She was leaving behind a lucrative operation, but she'd sent enough money away that it hadn't been wasted time. Gold rank cores were wildly expensive, but at least they could be had for money. On Earth, they were the rarest and most valuable commodity, perhaps other than reality cores.

The only thing she stopped to grab was a go-bag she had stashed for this exact eventuality. She took it and descended the tower she owned, not by the elevating platform but by the stairs. A secret door led into a basement that no one but a long-dead stone-shaper knew about. From there, a long tunnel led into the sewers. The sewer tunnels were massive, reminding her of a video game more than the actual sewers of Earth. There were sinister types to be found down here, but she let out just enough silver-rank aura to warn them off.

Li Mei had learned the importance of good aura control over the last decade and a half. She'd known that Jason Asano had far superior aura control to anyone else on Earth, but she hadn't realised how bad they all were until she arrived in Pallimustus. Looking back, it was no wonder he treated Earth's magical factions like posturing children.

She absently wondered what had happened to the man. The Earth refugees had all been cooped up at the Geller compound in Cyrion waiting for him. Then they were told that he wasn't coming. The stories as to what had happened were unclear, but many of the Earthlings believed him dead. Li Mei did not share that opinion.

She took to the streets further from her storehouse than she would like. It was close to one of the city gates, and had no ties to her on paper. It would be found eventually, she was certain, but she intended to be long gone by then. A well-dressed Chinese woman walking through one of the seedier sections of a city full of black people would be easy for her pursuers to find out about. Hopefully, she would be well away before that happened.

The storehouse had a large, fully loaded camping skimmer. It had amenities and supplies that would let her lay low on the inner reaches of the continent until she made her way to other parts of the world. She didn't trust hiring a portal specialist, and while ships were also a risk, it was one she could ameliorate. She wouldn't use her own shipping contacts, but she had a list of dockmasters who would reliably stay bribed and direct her to a captain to discreetly sail her out.

She breathed a sigh of relief as she reached the storehouse. She slipped down an alley beside it and carefully swept her sense through the building. Sensing nothing but the skimmer and its supplies, she used a very expensive crystal to unlock the reinforced door. She opened it and duck inside, using the crystal to lock it again.

“Yeah, that’s her.”

Li Mei froze. She slowly turned to find three people looking at her, including two women she didn’t recognise. The man looked different, and it had been more than fifteen years, but she recognised him immediately.

“G’day, Miss Li. It’s been a while.”