

Chapter 7: A Way Out!?

The trip back to Dollhome was far more interesting for Jack than the trip to Diagora's hoard. Though his clothes were still rather covered in gross goo -- and smelled strangely sweet -- they didn't affect his mobility much. At least at first. The goop started to stiffen, making each movement more and more uncomfortable by the moment. Still, it wasn't like he had a choice.

Lilah couldn't leave and lure monsters away, not with Parisa around. And Jack's own, newly awakened magic would probably just make him an easy target for monsters if they really wanted a piece of him. Especially given he didn't know how to use it.

Parisa, of course, doted on him the entire time. She stayed right behind him, always kept him within arm's reach, and talked up a thousand things they'd do when they got back to Dollhome, like group bathing, training Jack's new magic, teaching Jack everything he'd need to know, mending Jack's clothes, getting Jack a properly fitted bra, and Lilah couldn't keep her mouth shut and reminded Jack of Diagora's "command" to use lotion to make his skin softer. Between Parisa's constant affectionate doting and Lilah's humming, Jack felt smaller and smaller by the moment.

But it was nice in a strange way. As suffocating as Parisa was, she seemed to genuinely care about keeping Jack safe, even if she was a bit patronizing about it. Every once in a while when she became too personal -- inviting Jack to her room to sleep in bed with her -- Lilah spoke up for him, either changing the topic or reminding Parisa "Cecelia is shy! Give her a bit!"

Jack's half-hearted protests were about the most he could manage. He liked the attention, even if it made his cheek turn red and his heart skip a few beats once in a while. He'd already started forgetting about the slime that'd tried to corrupt him when Lilah stopped suddenly.

"Drone," Lilah said. Her ears twitched this way and that.

"A drone?" Jack echoed before immediately looking around. He was looking for some small little remote aircraft humming away above the treetops, but as he looked up, he saw something much different than he expected. A large bee woman buzzed about the tree tops holding a transparent spear that kind of resembled a giant syringe. She darted around with astonishing speed -- Jack could barely keep up with her.

"Hopefully she's not on the hunt," Parisa said as she nudged Jack behind her.

"I can..." Jack started, but he didn't know how to actually finish that sentence. What could he do? Sure, he had magic now, but he didn't understand how to use it. He didn't even really feel it anymore.

The buzzing grew fainter for a moment before it entirely faded away.

“She’s still here,” Lilah said. Her ears were pointed mostly upward. “She’s seeing if she can take us.”

Parisa sighed. “Ms. Bee-Lady,” she suddenly called out. “If you’re going to watch us, perhaps you would like to talk?”

Jack winced. “Is this a good idea?” he asked.

Lilah took a step back, moving a bit closer to Parisa and Jack. “I still don’t like doing any, you know, hurty magic,” she giggled.

“I figured as much. Don’t worry,” Parisa smiled. “I don’t think we’ll need to fight.”

A full minute passed in silence with the three waiting for the bee to respond. Eventually, they heard some buzzing, saw a few branches rustle, and then the buzzing going away.

“Hee! Good thing you were here! Those girls are super fast, I can’t really get away from them easily, and I couldn’t have protected Cecelia!” Lilah chirped.

Parisa didn’t respond. She just looked upward in silence.

“Parisa?” Lilah looked over to the angelic woman and frowned. “Pariiiisa? Hellooooo?” she called out.

“Strange,” Parisa murmured without any explanation.

Lilah and Jack just looked at her for a second, expecting some sort of follow up, but Parisa just closed her eyes and tapped her chin.

“Going to share with the class, big sis?” Jack said, wincing once again at how addressing Parisa as his big sis just slipped out so easily.

“Nothing to worry about! Either of you, let’s get back to Dollihome! I can’t wait to get a nice bath with the both of you. I’ll wash your hair and your backs, you’ll both look so cute!” she practically squealed.

Jack grimaced, Lilah just giggled. Before Jack was able to recognize Parisa just deflected his concern, they were already walking again, and Parisa wasted no time engaging Lilah in conversation about all the monsters she’d seen lately. Jack’s own politeness and desire not to interrupt eventually let the question slide from his mind, especially when they started talking about vampires. Before he knew it, Dollihome was within sight.

Some girls were out and about training. Some just running and doing basic exercises, others sparring and wrestling, but as soon as one caught sight of Parisa, she shouted, and before long, everyone was gathering around them with a thousand questions for the angel.

“Where have you been?”

“Didn’t you disappear, like, a year ago?”

“Wow! Cultists? What was that like?”

“I’m so happy you’re back!”

“I missed you!”

“Ezala sent out soooo many of us to look for you, but she totally won’t admit it!”

“I thought you turned into a monster!”

“Did you hear that Beatrice hit the highest rank? And Tulip too!?”

“Aria and Tilla are going to be so happy to have you back!”

Apparently, Parisa was quite popular. Then again, given the radiant smile she managed, the cute flicks of her hair, her beautiful wings, and her larger than life presence, Jack wasn’t surprised. She was immediately memorable, and looking around, as varied as everyone was, he didn’t see anyone else that looked like an angel.

“Girls! I’m so happy to be back, I missed all of you too! But it’s been a long time, and I haven’t slept in a proper bed or had a good bath in forever! Can we do this later?” she giggled as she walked up the steps. It was obvious she was enjoying this.

Jack was a bit too busy looking back at Parisa as he put his foot on the last step that he only saw the rush of movement from his peripherie. Hands clutched his shoulders, and a very familiar face was practically pressed right into his. “Cecelia!” Dama cheered.

Jack struggled for his balance. With only one foot on the top stair and having been mid step when Dama grabbed him, he was just about to fall over. “Dama!?” he managed to shout before he stumbled backward and fell.

For a moment, he considered if this was how he was going to go. Fall back and crack his skull on the steps while on some new planet with threats all around that could eat him. Thankfully, it was a short lived moment as a strong arm grabbed him and hoisted him back up.

“Careful, girl!” the amazon from yesterday said. “I got you,” she laughed.

Jack felt like he might as well have weighed as much as a feather with how easily the amazon stopped his fall and yanked him back up. No one had really noticed besides her, Dama, and Lilah. Dama sported a guilty-but-totally-innocent expression, and Lilah just looked relieved.

With Jack on both his feet at the top of the stairs, the amazon looked at him with a smile.

“Uhm... I...”

The amazon laughed. Jack hadn’t really taken a good look at her before. Lilah had some good abs, but this amazon was more muscle than anything else. Somehow, she still had some curves to her, but given she stood almost a foot taller than him, she looked like she could rip a tree out of the ground!

Jack’s face turned bright red as he fell entirely speechless.

“Why thank you!” Dama said, coming to his rescue. “Sorry, that was entirely my fault, I was just so excited to see my precious traveling companion, I didn’t realize how close to the edge she was! She’s shy, but I’m sure she really appreciates you saving her!”

Jack gulped. “Y-yeah. Thank you.”

The amazon just laughed again. “Bless your little gay heart,” she shook her head. “I’ve seen that look before! Don’t mention it.” The woman patted Jack on the head before turning to look at Dama. “But you should be more careful. Getting excited is no reason to almost hurt someone!”

Dama gave her best innocent expression as the woman walked past her. The veneer of innocence faded as her eyes locked onto Jack’s. “This place is wonderful, isn’t it Cecelia?” Dama reached down to take one of Jack’s hands. “It looks like you’re surrounded by quite the few cuties! Don’t you just feel safe?”

Jack, still a bit flustered, stammered uselessly.

“Of course she’s safe!” Parisa cooed. She wrapped an arm around Jack’s shoulder and pulled him against her tight enough that he could hardly move. “I’m taking good care of her. Are you one of her friends?”

“You could say th--” Dama was interrupted before she could finish her sentence by a high pitched yell.

“Get back here! You just woke up!” Ezala fluttered into the group and got right in Dama’s face. The fairy flailed comically for a few seconds before freezing up. She slowly turned her head to look at Parisa. “You!”

“Me?” Parisa gave an exaggerated gasp while pointing to herself.

“You’re back! You’re safe! I spent so long tracking you down to make sure that you wou--I mean. You’re an important asset to Dollhome Delivery! I’m glad to see you are fine.” Ezala twirled her hair with a finger. “It’s wonderful news.”

“Awwh,” Parisa giggled. “Well, you sent two amazing girls after me, of course they found me!” she beamed and squeezed Jack a little tighter.

“Unnkkkhh...” Lilah squeaked from the other side of Parisa’s hug. “Too tight...!”

Jack was glad he was big enough he didn’t have to deal with being squished like Lilah. But then again maybe it could be--No. Nope. He needed to keep himself focused. The last thing he needed was to let his guard down.

Dama giggled. She was staring right at Jack.

“What are *you* laughing at!?” Ezala twirled in the air and pointed her finger at Dama. “You’ve caused so many problems! So many! You have a bunch of explaining to do!” The gathering of women quickly started dispersing as Ezala raised her voice. The shrill yells of the fairy traveled a lot further than they had any right to. “I’m not letting you hide one thing from me! Now come here! To my office!”

Ezala flew right up to Dama and grabbed her by the earlobe and started tugging. “You’re coming too! Don’t think you’re getting out of this!”

“But I didn’t do anything!” Jack winced.

“Oww, hey! Come on now, you’re going to rip my earring out!”

Parisa pushed him forward and patted him on the head. “It’ll be okay! I’ll see you after Ezala is done shouting.” She even gave a cute little nose wiggle to send him off.

Jack trudged after Dama and Ezala. To be honest, he had a lot of questions for Dama himself, and maybe having the fairy interrogate her would get him a few of those answers. Really, the more he thought about it, the more excited he was. Especially after learning he had his own magic. The trip to Ezala’s office couldn’t be short enough.

“You, sit!” Ezala commanded as she pointed to a chair in front of an oversized desk. Ezala landed on the desk and started pacing back and forth. “Don’t just stand in the doorway, Cecelia! Get your butt in here!”

“Uh, right,” Jack wasn’t sure if he should feel good that Ezala remembered his “name” or if he should be worried.

The office itself was rather professionally done. Dark, moody colors, the smell of some sugary incense, knickknacks displayed on various shelves -- though Jack had no clue what most of them could even be. Beyond a few scattered books and some crumpled up papers, it really looked like any business person’s office back on Earth.

“You know, you seem rather high-strung. I can find some wonderful honey that would calm you right down. I assume there’s some lovely bee-ladies here ri--”

“Shush!” Ezala ordered.

Dama feigned offense before winking at Jack. “Oh my! So rude!”

Ezala stopped in the center of her desk and scowled. “I know the both of you are from Earth--”

“Well, not *from* but it is a wonderful rest...stop?” Dama’s voice trailed off in response to Ezala’s glare.

“There shouldn’t be any portals to Earth. *Obviously* Cecelia can’t be responsible given her total lack of magic, which, by the way, I see has changed.” She snapped and pointed at Cecelia. “But that little sliver of magic couldn’t have attracted any attention, so it must be you.” She tapped her foot as she thought.

“Moi?” Dama pursed her lips and tried to put on an innocent expression.

“I’ve been around for a long time, and I’ve seen you before.” Ezala shook her head. “I wasn’t sure at first, after all, it’s been hundreds of years since--”

“Hundreds of years!?” Jack gasped. “What? How old are you!?”

“You might as well ask my weight while you’re at it, how rude!” Dama snickered.

“You two! No more interrupting!” Ezala fumed. “Fine. Whatever. You, you’re human. Clearly. But you. What *are* you? And don’t try and sell me some ridiculous lie! I know you’re not fey, divinity, or demon.”

A still silence fell across the room. Dama's smile slowly slipped into a neutral expression, but she didn't say a word.

"I would really like to know, too," Jack said. "All of this stuff is new to me. I mean, I've met an elf, some angel lady, I'm pretty sure I saw an orc and a goblin, a dragon, and she's a fairy, so I think I can handle you being, like, a vampire or something."

Dama laughed. "I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you two! I'm just some lady who deeply loves watching things grow and change, and unfortunately I don't have a better answer than that for you. If it helps, just think of me as some ancient witch!"

"That's..." Ezala clenched her fist.

"Really?" Jack scoffed.

"That doesn't answer the question!" Ezala yelled and flailed her arms. "You're just trying to avoid it, aren't you!"

"Me? No, never!" Dama giggled.

"I'm gonna--I'm--Ah...!" Ezala puffed her cheeks out before turning around and sitting down. She muttered under her breath for a few moments before she popped back up. "Fine! At least say what kind of magic you use! Poor Lucia couldn't keep her hands off you! Even just sitting there, I can see things distorting around you!"

"Oh. Yes. I've noticed that too," Dama mused. "Something has been trying to toss me out since I got here! Not a very welcoming realm, if you ask me! I shouldn't spend too much time here, or else it might just break trying to get rid of me."

Jack's eyes lit up. "You mean, you know a way out? We can go back home? Well, to Earth, I mean?"

"Well. I can, but you wouldn't survive the trip. I was hoping to figure out some solution, but you might be stuck with more normal methods."

"Normal meth--"

"Echo~echo~echo~" Dama interrupted.

Ezala sighed. "Then you need to leave," she pointed at Dama. "I can have her returned in a month or two. Maybe three. Opening a new portal that can fit a human is hard, but we'll keep her safe til then. But you, you have to go. Whatever you're hiding has already started messing

with some of our enchantments. A few more days, and all the girls will probably be going nuts like Lucia. Including her, now that she's awakened." Ezala pointed to Jack.

"Wait, me?" Jack shook his head. "What's--how would I be in danger? I don't even understand what's going on? Do either of you mind explaining this to me?"

"Mm..." Dama tapped her chin. "That is true. I guess I could pop off and try to figure out a way to more easily blend in here, but I don't even have a clue where to begin. This is the first time my magic has reacted like this!"

"You're going to abandon me?" And Jack was so hopeful he had a way out just a minute ago.

"I can't do that either. I did promise I'd keep you safe," she tilted her head from side to side.

"This really is pretty problematic. I wonder why the mana field here is so intent on rejecting me? Then again, I never even knew this realm existed, and I'm still not sure how we even got here." She nodded. "Okay, I think we can work out a deal!"

Ezala and Jack both stared at Dama and asked the same question. "A deal?"

"Yes. A deal. I'll mozy on out and figure out a method for getting Cecelia home, but in the meantime, you'll have to help her awaken more of her magic! Cuteness affinity is so rare, after all!"

"...Cuteness affinity...?" Jack looked between Ezala and Dama.

Ezala grinned. "Deal. You get out of here, and I'll take her under my wings. If you can't figure a way out for her, I'll just return her when I can open a portal."

"Sounds great!" Dama cheered. Her entire body started glowing.

"No it doe--" Jack tried to protest, but Dama completely vanished. Just a red orb about the size of his palm was left where she was sitting. "...n't."

"Take that scrying orb to your room, then get back here so I can give you the basic education you're going to need," Ezala nodded eagerly.

Jack stared in complete disbelief.

His one major lifeline just... ditched him. And it was getting about time to use the perfume again. He was going to run out soon, and then what...?