

Interlude 1 – A Task

Bunny Bai ran her finger down the boxy headset that covered the top half of Jakobe Liu's face. He smiled.

"What did you look like before you had this?" she asked, the scuffed metal of the headset cool against her fingertips.

"A lot fuckin' uglier if you can imagine that," he replied.

She laughed. "You'd better watch out. If the sect leader hears that kind of language, he's going to be pissed."

"Right. I keep forgetting."

He reached up to take her hand in his. "It's a piece of junk, but it's all I could afford. And after all the upgrades, taking it out or switching it would be painful. *Very* painful. Not that I have the cash to even think about that."

"I know. I'm not saying I don't like it. I do. I think it's sexy." She tilted her head to the side as she leaned forward and kissed him, the cold metal of the headset pushing into the side of her cheek.

There was a knock at the door.

Jakobe reached into his dimensional pendant and pulled out his Type 77-16 while simultaneously getting off the bed and walking quietly toward the door. Bunny also left the bed, tapping into her Wind root of energy and putting her hands together to prepare a hand sign.

"It's just me," a voice said.

"Sect Leader?" Jakobe said. He returned his pistol to the pendant and buttoned up the front of his shirt.

"Yes," came the reply. "Sorry to come by so late."

Bunny reached to the chair by the window, grabbed her lacy black dress, and threw it on over her head. At the same time, Jakobe scanned the hall with divine sense, then unlocked the door.

It opened to reveal Yu Yitai, sect leader of the Naturalism Sect, clad in his characteristic blue suit, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He held a plastic shopping bag in one hand. "Can I come in?"

"Of course."

As Yu Yitai stepped into the cramped motel room, Bunny pulled the chair over and said, "Have a seat, Sect Leader."

"Thank you." He sat, then gestured for them to do the same, which they did, at the edge of the bed.

"Would you like some water?" Bunny asked.

"No thank you. I come bearing a little gift." He offered the plastic bag to Jakobe.

Jakobe took it. "Er...."

"Take a look," Yu Yitai said, smiling faintly.

Jakobe pulled a plastic container out of the bag and popped the lid. He grinned. "B'stillas?"

Yu Yitai nodded. "I was on the other side of town for most of the day and happened to spot a restaurant selling Beifei specialties. Figured you might appreciate a taste of home."

"You really didn't have to go to the trouble, Sect Leader."

"I just hope they measure up."

"Thank you." Jakobe looked at Bunny. "Have you ever had b'stillas?"

"Never even heard of them."

“They’re pastries with meat. You’ll love ‘em.” Placing the bag and container off to the side, he continued, “But I have the feeling there’s a more important reason you came in person, Sect Leader.”

“You’re right, Novice Liu. I’m here because I came to a realization. There was a clue that was given to me months ago, but only made sense this morning while I was out. Something relating to you.”

“Me?” Jakobe said.

“You and your dreams. Given how busy we’ve been with the mission, we haven’t been able to spend as much time together as I’d hoped, at least as far as it relates to your abilities. Speaking of which, have you had any new visions?”

Jakobe shrugged. “The dreams have been confusing lately. It’s hard to tell what’s an ordinary dream and what’s a vision. There’ve been a lot of the same random things. A baby. A lake. Maybe two or three lakes; it’s hard to tell if they’re the same one. An old woman in a tent, rocking back and forth and laughing. Or maybe crying. Lots of rain. Darkness. Screaming. Some sort of shining hourglass.”

Yu Yitai leaned forward. “An old woman? You never mentioned that before.”

“The first time she didn’t stand out much,” Jakobe answered. “But I saw her last night for the second time, and I don’t know why, but something about her seems important.”

“I think this confirms my suspicion about the clue I mentioned. If I’m not mistaken, the woman you saw is an old friend of mine, and also, she’s one of the few people I know of besides you who can dream of the future.”

“I always got the impression those other people you mentioned were dead.”

Yu Yitai nodded. “In some ways, the woman who was my friend might as well be dead; all that remains is a husk with fragments of her personality. You see, she experienced cultivation deviation, which shattered her mind. But in her occasional moments of lucidity, she still manages to make sense. What’s more... she mentioned you. Not by name, but by inference. As I said, it was a clue that only made sense this morning. She called you ‘the one with the eyes.’

“Not only was her sentence structure confusing, but I got caught up on the ‘eyes’ part. Now I realize she must have been speaking metaphorically. After all, while you lack eyes, you can ‘see’ things that most people can’t. Anyway, the important part is that she said she’s waiting for you.”

Jakobe exhaled in a near-whistle. "That's...."

"Creepy," Bunny said.

"To some extent, it is," the sect leader replied. "However, given the increasing danger as we head closer and closer to the First Heaven and also how much trouble you're having getting control of your powers, I think it might be wise for you to seek her out. If you're willing to travel alone, just the two of you."

"To where?" Jakobe asked.

"To the Tenth Earth. I'll escort you to the Ninth, as I have something to retrieve there. Plus, there are things you need to know about the Tenth that I can explain while traveling. Once you get there, though, you'll be on your own. Are you willing?"

Bunny and Jakobe looked at each other.

"If it means figuring out how to control your dreams," Bunny said, "then I vote 'yes.'"

Jakobe nodded. "I vote 'yes' too. Let's do it."

"Good," Yu Yitai said, rising. "We'll leave first thing in the morning."