

Chapter 379

An Unexpected Direction

Jason walked over the surface of the water with his niece, his cloak wrapped around them both to keep her body light. The Tiwari patriarch also walked over the water, while Itsuki and his father rode in an inflatable dinghy. Motes of light emerged from Jason's cloak, spreading out to illuminate the cave in soft starlight.

"It's pretty," Emi said.

"I've always thought so," Jason said. "So much of what I do is ugly, so I quite like this."

Some distance into the cave, the floor rose above the water level due to the low tide and all five people stood on the wet sand from which the water had receded.

At the back of the cave was a hewn wall carved from the solid stone, with metal rungs set into it. Jason spotted the pockmarks where the rungs had corroded away and been replaced several times over the centuries.

"There's no magic here," Jason said, tilting his head. "It's deeper. Much, much deeper."

"You can sense that?" Koya asked.

"Barely, and only because I was looking for it. The logistical problems involved in sinking a mineshaft on a tropical island are formidable. Without magic to keep the shaft sealed and reinforced, maintenance must be an issue."

"The founder didn't want anyone to notice a patch of magic in the middle of nowhere by happenstance," Denji explained. "The wall holds back the high tide and there's a shaft on the other side, going deep enough that the magic down there is undetectable from the outside. Unless your magical senses are absurdly powerful, anyway."

"How are your senses so strong?" Itsuki asked Jason.

"Supernatural senses – that's your magic and aura detection," Jason explained, "are a function of your aura, like a radar tower sending out signals. Except not, but for the purposes of this analogy it's close enough. A stronger aura is like a stronger radar emitter, giving you're a more powerful sense of your surroundings."

"I'd love to have senses that strong," Itsuki said.

"Be careful what you wish for," Jason told him. "Not every power is worth the price."

Jason leapt lightly up to the top of the wall and used an extending shadow arm to pull Emi up after him. He opened his inventory and took out a necklace with a blue jewel.

“This will let you breathe if the air gets a bit sketchy down there,” Jason said as he affixed it around her neck. “Ready?”

Emi flashed him a grin and they jumped off, Jason’s cloak allowing them to float down. Motes of light from Jason’s cloak trailed them like fairy dust as they descended for what felt like an eternity until they finally emerged from the shaft into a large chamber and set down on the floor.

Jason’s starlight motes spread out to reveal a five-sided room. Each wall was made up of liquid-smooth marble whose colouration reminded Jason of the light generated by transcendent damage. The marble was white with streaks of blue, silver and gold, with an aperture in each wall the size of a human head. There was a soft white light shining from each of the five apertures.

This far down, the magic was not just detectable but intimidating. Between gods and the Builder, Jason had experienced enough transcendent-rank power to recognise it when he experienced it. Fortunately, he could also sense that it was at some kind of remove, preventing it from overwhelming him. He glanced at Emi, who didn’t even seem to notice it due to her lack of aura senses. She was eagerly looking around the room.

“Where’s the door?” she asked. “Has the door been a metaphor this whole time?”

“We’ll have to wait until the other get down here,” Jason said. He could sense the three clansmen slowly descending the shaft.

“If they tell us the door was inside us all along,” Emi said, “I’m going to need you to beat them up.”

Jason laughed, tussling his niece’s hair.

“Uncle Jason,” she complained, pushing his hand away.

The three Tiwari men dropped through the ceiling on the end of magical ropes, their feet slipped into loops at the end.

“How does this work?” Jason asked.

“It’s quite simple,” Denji explained. “You can sense the power of it, yes? How it’s sealed away?”

“Yes.”

“You stand in the middle of the room and concentrate – after the rest of us are out of the way.”

Jason looked around the clean pentagon that made up the room.

“Out of the way where?”

“We can stand in the corners, where the walls meet,” Koya said. “So long as we’re clear of the apertures in the middle of the walls, we’ll be unaffected.”

“You’ll find the power quite easy to access,” Denji said. “Enduring it is up to you.”

“So, I just want the door to open and it does?” Jason asked. “That sounds suspiciously like the door was inside me all along.”

Emi snorted a laugh.

“That’s not how it works at all,” Denji said. “Be aware that the power you will be exposed to is vast. None of our people have ever been able to endure it and enter the door. Only on hearing about your powerful aura did we seriously consider that you might be the person we were waiting for. That will hopefully allow you to resist the power long enough to gain passage.”

The others moved to the side of the room, at the point where two of the pentagonal chamber’s five walls met.

“You are responsible for the safety of my niece while I’m otherwise indisposed,” Jason told the Tiwari men. “I recommend you take that responsibility very seriously.”

“Of course,” Koya said.

“No,” Jason said. “This is not a matter of course. You keep her safe or you’ll wish your clan had used a better poison on me.”

“Uncle Jason, don’t be a dick. They know you’ll wipe out their whole clan if anything happens to me. You don’t have to rub their noses in it.”

“Sorry Moppet.”

The Tiwari men looked from Jason to his niece with pale expressions.

“Okay,” Jason said, rubbing his hands eagerly as he made his way into the centre of the room. “Let’s give this a try.”

Jason moved into the middle of the room and extended his senses. The power in the room answered immediately, transcendent light beaming out from the apertures in each wall, meeting in the middle to shine directly on him. The power crashed over him in a tsunami of pure, clean, magic, drowning him in it like the aura suppression of a god. Even Jason’s powerful aura was like a paper boat in a hurricane, blasted away in an instant.

Jason forced his eyes open to check on the others, who were unaffected as promised. He paid them no more mind, gritting his teeth as he stood against the storm of magic. It was not Jason’s first transcendent-rank rodeo, however, nor his first time having his aura pounded down to nothing. It felt like he was being squeezed in a giant fist but he endured with little more than a grim expression. Suddenly the light vanished and Jason vanished with it.

Jason felt like something was trying to pull his body apart but the sensation passed after just a moment. His vision swam into focus and he found himself in an alien landscape filled with amber light. A pair of windows popped up to obscure his view.

- You have entered a space of combined physical and astral nature. You have gained an instance of [Dimensional Discorporation] and will periodically gain additional instances until you leave this space.
 - You are a gestalt entity combining physical and astral nature; [Dimensional Discorporation] has no effect.
 - You have resisted [Dimensional Discorporation].
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
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Jason dismissed the first window, reflecting on the foresight in the ability the World-Phoenix had designed for him. It irked him to be dancing to someone else's tune but he was forced to admit that, as much as he mistrusted anyone or anything with that much power, the World-Phoenix had given him much. From coming back from the dead to bringing him home, it had asked no more in return thus far than things he would have done anyway.

Closing the first window cleared his vision a bit and he glanced around, discovering the place he found himself in was very much not the subterranean chamber he had just come from. The amber light that was the first thing he'd noticed was thick to the point of rendering the world around him monochromatic. Just as thick as the light was the aura suffusing everything, so powerful it seemed almost solid. He was on a small rise under an open sky, the terrain around him generally flat but uneven ground. It was covered in grass, with fragmentary ruins sticking out of the turf.

Seeing no immediate threats, or much of anything at all, he took a look at the second window.

- You have entered a domain of the Builder.
 - By entering this domain you have subjected your soul to the influence and authority of the Builder. You have gained an instance of [Builder's Dominion].
 - Your soul has learned to reject the influence and authority of the Builder; [Builder's Dominion] has no effect.
 - You have resisted [Builder's Dominion].
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
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"Dawn didn't warn me about that," Jason snarled. "I think we need to have a little conversation."

"As do you and I," said a voice. Jason looked in that direction to see a man emerge from behind the shattered remnant of a vaguely Greek column. The man had a sharp suit, an expensive haircut, dark eyes and a predator's smile.

"It's about time you showed up," the man said. "I'm a busy man, Mr Asano, but I knew you'd get here eventually. I was confident that whoever sent you back to this world would make sure you were up to the task, which is why I never bothered to stop my people from trying to kill you. If they succeeded, you weren't good enough for what needs to be done anyway."

"You have me at a disadvantage," Jason said.

"Oh, you have no idea," the man said, grinning like a snake who found a nest full of baby mice. "I have many names, but the one you are most likely to know is Mr North."

"The leader I was told the EOA didn't have," Jason said. "You have a lot to answer for."

"But now is not the time," Mr North said.

"Are you sure that's your choice to make?"

"No, it's yours, but you're a smart man, Mr Asano. More or less."

Jason paused to take stock, pushing his senses to their limits. Detecting anything through the oppressive aura suffusing the space around them was like pushing through treacle but he managed to get a read on Mr North.

"You're gold rank."

Mr North's only response was another Cheshire grin.

"What are you?" Jason asked. "You're not an essence user. Some kind of native magical creature? But Earth doesn't have those. And there's something else..."

Jason's eyes went wide.

"You're a familiar. A bonded familiar but your bond has been severed."

"Your senses are as sharp as advertised, noticing that much in this place. I was a rune spider, originally, although I've come so very far from those days. Becoming a familiar offers a creature like me many opportunities if you look at things in the long term. You do have to pick your essence user with care. Someone who will rank up well, obviously, but there are other pitfalls. As I came to discover."

"Your essence user died?"

Jason's first encounter with a native magical creature had been the familiar Landemere Vane, both the first person he met from another world and the first person he killed. Vane's familiar had tried to take revenge, only to fall victim to aging masonry.

“My essence user did die,” Mr North said. “That was not until after our bond was severed, however. You’ve heard of bonded familiars parting ways with their essence users, yes?”

“I have. The connection is intimate, so when the familiar and the essence user become irrevocably at odds, the bond breaks.”

“My essence user was blinded by faith. Sacrifice after sacrifice, giving up power and prestige to lift up a bunch of savages.”

“The Network founder was your essence user,” Jason realised. “That’s how you knew about this place.”

“Just so,” Mr North said. “It’s so nice to talk to someone quick on the uptake. My own minions were quite disappointing before Adrien Barbou came along. Thank you for putting him in a position to come my way. If the Lyon branch’s plans had worked out better, I’d have missed out on a quality subordinate.”

Jason narrowed his eyes.

“You’re what happened to the Network founder, aren’t you?”

“I am,” Mr North said. “Trussed him up and handed him off to some gentlemen in Philadelphia. This was back in the colonial days, long before the Network proper. They didn’t have the power to take him down, of course, leaving me to do all the work. I felt bad, later, about the unpleasant end my bond-mate come to. We were so close, once, after all. I was quite angry at the time, though, and I’ve been reaping the benefits of that deal ever since. It gave the US network branches quite the head start, once the magic started ticking up.”

“The US network branches are feeding the EOA resources and information?”

“Only a few critical members,” Mr North said. “For the most part, their animosity to my little organisation is quite genuine. Feel free to tell them; they’re a little too unified at the moment. A little internal strife would serve me well.”

“Why are you here and what do you want?”

“For you, obviously. This world needs saving and I’ve put a lot of work into it. I need to make sure you do it right.”