

Chapter 362

Arms Race

Akari led Jason and Dawn into the clifftop house. What was remarkable about Asano Village's clifftop homes was that most of their space was underground, dug into solid rock. The underground portion then emerged from the cliff face with a glass wall offering views over the Pacific Ocean.

Without access to magic, the construction of the cliff houses would have been dangerous and the results unstable. Since magic was involved, it was simply impressive, which Jason was reminded of as he walked up the glass wall in Akari's underground lounge room.

"This is nice," he said. "If I didn't already have a place, I'd definitely pick one of these."

"Where do you live, exactly?" Akari asked. "I thought it was in the main residence, but it's not, is it?"

"No," Jason said. "I have a little spot tucked away."

Jason turned from the window and they sat in the lounge chairs around a coffee table, although no one took out refreshments.

"As I stated outside," Dawn said to Akari, "the time has come for you to make plain your purpose in coming to Australia. Normally I would not have revealed as much as I have about myself to you, but you are the gateway to preparing for the next challenge this world will face."

"Meaning what, exactly?" Akari asked.

"Meaning that the Tiwari clan's guardianship is coming to an end."

"Tiwari?" Jason asked. "That's an Indian name, not a Japanese one."

"Yes," Akari said. "Centuries ago, the Network founder came to Japan, creating the secret societies that today are Japan's Network branches. The founder brought with him the Tiwari family. They were the guardians of an ancient object of incredible power and he brought them to Japan to keep it hidden. After centuries of intermarrying the locals, while the name and bloodline remain, they are, by any discernable measure, Japanese."

"What is this object?" Jason asked. "Dawn has been maddeningly vague."

"A door," Akari said. "No one is exactly sure where it leads, only that it is a world not our own. Further, when the door is moved, it opens to a new location. As best as anyone has been able to determine, wherever it is, it leads to an equivalent point in another world."

"Is it Farrah's world?" Jason asked Dawn.

"No," Dawn said. "In fact, Akari is incorrect. The door does not lead to another world, but a hidden aspect of this one. It gives access to the building blocks with which this universe was constructed."

"You're talking about the templates that the original Builder used," Jason said.

"Yes," Dawn said. "The door is a tool for accessing the fundamental underpinnings of not just this reality but the other to which it is connected."

"And this place can be physically entered through this door? Is it some kind of sub-dimension?"

"The specifics are significantly above your current grasp of astral magic," Dawn said. "Sub-dimension is a sufficient explanation for now."

"That sounds like it would be dangerous to mess with," Jason said.

"Yes," Dawn agreed. "Your world and your friend Farrah's have always been connected. They were built that way. That connection is woven into the fabric of your two realities. It causes echoes from one to the other."

"I noticed from the start that odd things seemed to work the same way in both worlds," Jason said. "Everything from the people of that world appearing in our legends to the way we keep time being identical."

"That is a factor of the resonance," Dawn said. "Echoes between worlds constructed on the same model, imprinting on one another."

"Which is how you get a lion-man named Gary, I suppose."

Akari was listening in silence. She quickly realised that she was being made privy to some of the greatest secrets that existed and while she was missing many of the specifics, she followed as best she could.

"Someone came to this world centuries ago," Dawn said. "They brought with them the door now in the Tiwari clan's possession. The connection between realities is a fabric that stretches across the universe. That door is a tool that can modify small portions of that fabric. On a universal scale, it can only affect a fragmentary space, but that is enough to strengthen the link between two connected points."

"Such as two versions of the same world," Jason said.

"Precisely."

"Why didn't you tell me any of this before now?" Jason asked.

"Because I did not know," Dawn said. "While you have been treating the symptoms of the problem at hand, I have been seeking the cause. The strands connecting the two realities lay thick across your universes. The strands connecting this planet, in this universe, to its equivalent in the other universe have been enhanced. It only affects the

area around this planet, although if the link is not returned to its natural state, there could be catastrophic knock-on effects as the fabric of the link begins to fray."

"I'm assuming that's a metaphor. Also that it's really bad."

"If this planet is lost, the rupture in this reality could potentially chain through your universe and cause it to collapse entirely. The other universe has a dimensional membrane supple enough to endure the backlash, but this one may not."

"So, the escalating magic is only here, on Earth," Jason said. "It's not affecting aliens and such, but if we lose the Earth, we may lose the universe."

"I have touched on this when we spoke in the past," Dawn said. "To return the link to its normal state, you must rectify the problems here, then return to the other reality and do so on the other side."

"Save the universe, no pressure. How do I do that, exactly?"

"The original connection between universes is an intrinsic element of the design by which the original Builder created both realities. When the templates on which it is based are made manifest, the components of that link are brought into physical being. The door is a tool that makes those templates manifest, allowing the collection of those components. Collect enough and the door can be used to modify the link."

"How exactly do you find this stuff out?" Jason asked. "Is there an online encyclopaedia for wizards or something? Is it subscription or can you just use a free account?"

"Do you know what an astral resonance imprint beacon is?" Dawn asked.

"It's kind of a recording probe, right?" Jason said. "It's sensitive to astral forces and if you're crazy good at understanding astral effects, you can interpret the readings."

"You've been studying your astral magic books," Dawn said.

"I've had to distract myself in my downtime somehow," Jason said. "Normally I'd cook, but there's all this rationing going on. If I'm following all of this correctly – which is a big if – then this magic door can rewrite the DNA of the universe."

"Very broadly speaking and on a very small scale, but something like that," Dawn acknowledged.

"Which means the Builder made this door, right? The current Builder. Unless there's someone else out there who can fiddle with reality on that level."

"There is not," Dawn said. "That being said, I believe that it was not a follower of the Builder who brought the door here, however. It was an outworlder, like you, but one who had entered the service of one of the other world's gods."

"Purity has been working with the Builder," Jason said.

"This person likely modified the link in the other reality first, then came here and did the same. This set in motion the magic siphoning from the other reality's version of this planet to this one. The impact was slight, at first, but it's been escalating. Over the last century and a half, that escalation has become precipitous, leading to a rise in the number and the strength of the proto-spaces being formed."

"The person who did all this," Jason said. "Is it the same one who built the grid and founded the Network?"

"I believe so."

"Why?"

"Balance," Dawn said. "The architect of this plan does not want the planet destroyed, at least not until they are done with it. They need it in place to soak up the magic that would normally accumulate around the other world until it triggered a magic surge."

"Which is why the grid never covered the ocean," Jason reasoned. "It was never intended to stop all the magic, just regulate it. The grid – and by extension, the Network – is a safety valve designed to keep things under control once the magic started building to dangerous levels."

"This was my conclusion as well," Dawn said. "The grid could have covered the oceans if the original designer had wanted it to do so. Giving the Network the tools to traverse aquatic environments and confront monsters there would certainly have been within their capabilities."

"We're still soaking up the magic from Pallimustus that would normally become a monster surge," Jason said. "Is that why the monster surges have been taking longer and longer?"

"Yes," Dawn said. "With how much magic Earth is siphoning right now, the monster surges have stopped altogether. They won't resume until the enhanced link to Earth is reduced to its original state, at least on this side of the link."

"They haven't had the surge yet?" Jason asked.

"No."

"That makes it something like fifteen years, now. They must be going nuts. And once we shut off the spigot on this end, won't they get the hum-dinger of all monster surges?"

"Yes. They have been on the cusp of a monster surge so long that once it happens, there will be an unprecedented breach in the dimensional membrane in the vicinity of their planet. This will allow the Builder's forces, which are already poised for an invasion, to come through with all the magical manifestations."

"I thought your boss and the Builder had a non-intervention deal. It feels a lot like he's still rummaging about in both worlds."

"That accord prohibits only direct intervention. It does not cover the use of mortal agents or events already set into motion."

"It sounds like he's already off to the races," Jason said. "That deal doesn't sound super-helpful."

"The deal more thoroughly prohibits intervention in your world. Even my involvement is pushing the boundary, even at a remove. If not for dimensional integrity being the direct purview of the World-Phoenix, I would not even be allowed this much."

"Yeah, I'm sorry. I know you're here to help."

Jason grimaced.

"If I'm following this correctly," he said, "To save this world, I need to doom Farrah's world to an interdimensional invasion."

"If it makes you feel better, letting your world die would have the same effect," Dawn said. "It would just take longer."

"Great."

"You will need to rectify the enhanced link on this side first, which will at least slow down the damage to your world as it exposes the other. Then you must go there and resolve the link on the other side."

"You told us we'd have to go back."

"Yes," Dawn said. "At the time, I had discovered that the link would need to be adjusted at both ends. Now I know why and how."

"I need to go get the magic door."

"The door is only the beginning," Dawn said. "To use it to modify the link, you must do what was done when the link was first modified. Collect the elements of the link left behind by the original Builder in the templates on which your world was constructed. Gather enough and you can restore the link to its original state."

"Oh, a fetch quest, great. If I kill ten boars, do I get a green-quality spear?"

"Originally, you would use the door to give us access to those templates. Circumstances have changed."

"The EOA," Jason realised. "They plugged the safety valve. You said that when the grid went back up, there would be a magical backlash."

"Yes," Dawn said. "The templates, and the manifested link components within them, will start to appear randomly, reshaping your world. You will no longer require the door to access them, although it will still be necessary to rectify the link."

"Isn't that good, in a way?" Jason asked. "We should be able to gather these link components more easily."

"As will anyone else," Dawn said. "These components will be the most magically dense objects on your world. Do you think it is more likely that the magical factions come together for the greater good, or leap into a magical arms race?"

"Oh, crap."

Jason and Dawn took the time to fill Akari in on at least the broad strokes of what she had heard. They didn't go into too much detail, just enough to give her a general understanding of what was happening and what was at stake.

"You need me to convince the Tiwari to give you the door," she said.

"Yes," Jason said. "What I don't understand is what led to you coming here. I think we can safely put aside the pretence of assessing the worthiness of my family."

"That is not as much pretence as you may think," Akari said. "We take the honour of our name seriously."

"Well I have to save the universe, so let's put that aside for right now. Why are you here?"

"The founder left the Tiwari clan with a prophecy," Akari said. "When monsters walked the world, a man of two worlds would close the door forever. They believe that man is you. Given your name, they came to us in the hope of approaching you. We have been Network allies for many years, but the revelation of the door and the clan's origin was news to us. I was sent to assess not your clan, but you. To see if you could be trusted with this secret."

"Which obviously I can, because I'm terrific."

"You are a hard person to like," Akari said.

"I have to assume that's another level of control," Jason said. "If they wanted to shut the link down once it had served its purpose, the person most likely to have the ability and knowledge would be an outworlder."

"Yes," Dawn said. "The conditions for an outworlder to be sucked between worlds rather than simply annihilated are quite specific but with the link in the state it is in, those conditions being met somewhere in your world were an inevitability."

"Are you sure?" Jason asked. "Seems like bit of a gamble."

"A gamble one might be willing to make if they were willing to live with your world being destroyed if it didn't pay off. Or perhaps they were relying on forces recognising the danger and taking steps to rectify it. The goddess of Knowledge gave you a trove of astral

magic knowledge to take home. The World-Phoenix made sure you would get there. I don't think the Builder was happy that you were the agent the World-Phoenix chose, but it seems likely in hindsight that he did anticipate her actions."

"Meaning your boss got played," Jason said.

"Yes," Dawn said. "The Builder, for all his seeming short-sightedness and frustration, seems to be getting everything he wants. Even you, saving your world, serves him by setting in motion his invasion of Pallimustus. The bargain that keeps him from intervening in this world limits the World-Phoenix's ability to act against him, now."

"You're telling me that getting obsessed with me was all an act?"

"Probably not," Dawn said. "I suspect that obsession was inherited from his vessel. As it served to mask his true intentions, it could be that he deliberately inhabited a vessel that would make him appear foolish. Or it could be happenstance."

"So, what now?" Jason asked Dawn. "We go to Japan and take this door?"

"First, warn the Network about the template manifestations. There is no telling exactly what will happen but there will hopefully be a need for large-scale evacuations."

"Hopefully?" Jason asked.

"As opposed to people being dissolved into nothingness as the reality around them is reshaped."

"Yeah, that would be bad," Jason said.

"Next, we need to collect the door," Dawn said. "It needs to be in your possession before the templates begin to manifest. If the magic factions discover it and learn what it can do, they will start fighting over it."

Jason and Dawn both turned to Akari.

"What?" Akari asked.

"Are you going to warn your people about how important the door is?" Jason asked. "If they know, then they will extort everything they can for it."

"Only a few members of the Asano clan know of this and they will act with honour," Akari insisted.

"And what about the Tiwari clan?" Jason asked. "Will they share your unflinching honour?"

Akari frowned.

"I would like to think so," she said, "but I cannot speak for them."

"I'd like to get in a room with that EOA defector at some point, as well," Jason said. "I want to know where they're getting the Builder's clockwork cores from."

"That doesn't matter at the moment," Dawn said. "You don't have time to visit the United States. There are now larger concerns at play than the Engineers of Ascension."