

Chapter 380

Parade of Delights

In an otherworldly realm washed in amber monochrome, Jason was face to face with Mr North, the head of the Engineers of Ascension.

“Saving the world the right way requires your guidance, does it?” Jason asked. “You’ll forgive me for not taking you at your word.”

“Repairing the link between worlds is just the beginning,” Mr North said. “If you make a mistake now, we’ll all pay for it later.”

“Oh, so you’re an altruist.”

“It’s not inconsistent with selfishness to save the planet you’re standing on, Mr Asano.”

“What is this subsequent threat I need to be wary of?”

“While I recognise that being more forthcoming would help establish trust,” Mr North said, “that isn’t a feasible approach at this time. If you learn too much now, things won’t go the way they need to. Suffice to say that you will learn, in time, and you won’t be happy about it.”

“You’re not exactly selling it, here.”

“I know having things kept from you isn’t what you want, Mr Asano, but it’s what you need. It won’t feel like it, but I’m helping you right now. Even telling you this much may be compromising too much.”

“Then why are you here?” Jason asked. “If you wanted to not tell me things, you could have done that from home.”

“I need to set you on the path. The day will come, Mr Asano, when you and I become allies.”

“You’re responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths.”

“I don’t deny it. Not to you, anyway. That doesn’t change the reality.”

“I could just kill you here,” Jason said.

“You could try,” Mr North said. “I’m gold rank but not an essence user. The odds would be in my favour but you’ve beaten long odds before. You have a way of coming through in the critical moments I won’t underestimate. It would be a risk, though. You have responsibilities. Will you put your ability to meet them in jeopardy just to punish me for past injustices?”

“I think you’ve got plenty of injustice left in you,” Jason said. “How much death and misery is prevented if you die in this hole?”

“It’s just the opposite, Mr Asano. You’re here to save the world this time, but I’m the only one getting ready for next time.”

“Which you aren’t going to tell me about.”

“Correct.”

At his side, Jason’s fingers twitched, eager to conjure his dagger and lunge at the man in front of him.

“How do you see this going?” Jason asked.

“You’re here for the door,” Mr North said. “I’m here to make sure you don’t just claim it but absorb it.”

“Absorb it?”

“It’s critical that the door cannot be taken from you by anyone. It has to become a part of you.”

“How does a door become part of me?”

“It’s not a literal door, Mr Asano, although it often appears as such. It’s an astral construct with the power to manifest in physical reality in the form of a portal. Much the same principal as your portal archways.”

“This door is an object of the Builder.”

“Yes.”

“The Builder has tried to worm his way into my soul before. I’m not giving him another shot.”

“It has?”

“Someone tried to shove a star seed up in me.”

“And it didn’t work?” Mr North laughed. “Mr Asano, you are a parade of delights. It seems that I couldn’t have asked for anyone better. You need to take this particular object off the Builder’s hands.”

“So say you. You could easily be his lackey, setting me up for a fall. You don’t seem to be bothered by the Builder’s influence in this place.”

“My bond-mate’s deity and the Builder long ago came to an accord regarding your world and the other. While my bond-mate is long dead, I still enjoy an amnesty from the Builder’s incidental attentions.”

“Again, I have nothing to go on but the word of a man who should be on trial in The Hague.”

“Let me show you, and you can decide for yourself. I’ve made no small preparations for this.”

“I’ll go along with this. For now.”

Mr North grinned.

“If you were near the end of silver, instead of just the beginning, this would be a very different conversation, wouldn't it?”

“It wouldn't be a conversation.”

“So intimidating.”

“Just get on with it.”

“Of course. Follow me, Mr Asano. We need to go to the heart of this little realm.”

The amber-lit terrain was uneven but mostly flat grassland, dotted with fragmentary ruins. As he followed Mr North, Jason's eyes picked out chunks of ruin sticking out of the ground that looked Greek, Cambodian and Mayan, along with more alien elements that would not have looked out of place on the cover of some Lovecraftian fiction.

“You are not what I expected, Mr North.”

“You're the only person I've seen in centuries who has been to my home world, Mr Asano. I feel like I can be myself around you. With the EOA I have this need to be the stern and sinister authoritarian figure, which can be fun, but it gets tiring after a while. That being said, I've heard you're not above playing the sinister authoritarian yourself. You should consider joining, now that you're no longer affiliated with the Network. I know that might seem like an outrageous proposition but have you considered that if you were part of the leadership, you could take the organisation in a more positive direction. You wouldn't even have to take orders from me. We could be partners. Maybe even friends.”

“Do you know what a nightmare hag is, Mr North?”

“It's some kind of fear monster, right?”

“It's an astral being, not a monster, but yes. It takes things from your deepest fears and makes them manifest. Would you like to know what it showed me?”

“I'm not sure I grasp the purpose of this conversational segue but do tell.”

“It showed me version of myself that could be friends with you.”

“You do realise how self-centred it is that your greatest fear is some version of yourself, right?”

Mr North led Jason to a small dell that had been hard to notice with the light washing out the geographical features. At the bottom was a series of large standing stones, arranged in a circle. The stones were the same marble as the walls of the pentagon room through which Jason had entered the realm; white with veins of blue, silver and gold. The stones hadn't been polished slippery smooth, however, looking rough-hewn and weathered.

Mr North made his way down the slope of the dell, with Jason following after. Mr North pointed out a series of wooden crates on the grass inside the stone circle.

“Prying this place out of the Builder’s control and into yours will be an intricate and elaborate process,” Mr North said. “I’ve been gathering the materials we need for longer than you’ve been alive. I’ll start talking you through the process as we start unpacking it all.”

As they reached the circle of stones, Jason reached out and touched one.

Item: [Fundament Gate] (transcendent rank, legendary)

???. (???, ???).

- Effect: ???.
- Effect: ???.

- Your soul’s ability to resist the Builder’s influence and your [Spirit Vault] ability allow you to incorporate this item into your spirit vault. Doing so will purge the Builder’s influence and the item’s effects, instead altering your abilities.
- The affected abilities will have their strength diminished due to your low rank, until your rank increases.
- Once incorporated, this object cannot be removed or made use of by anyone else. Incorporating this item into your spirit vault will affect the following abilities:

- [Spirit Vault]: Your ability to sense Builder-related items and resist their effects will be significantly increased. You will be able to directly attack Builder-related items using soul attacks.

- [Path of Shadows]: This ability will gain an additional effect. If you can comprehend the fundamental aspects of an area of physical reality, you can open a portal to a manifested space where those fundamental aspects can be accessed. Such spaces will be semi-physical and semi-astral in nature and will negatively affect anyone without both a physical body and an astral affinity.

Jason appeared to be staring blankly as he read the screen Mr North couldn’t see.

“What are you spacing out about?” Mr North asked. “We have hours of work ahead of us. I just hope your astral magic is up to scratch or this will take even longer.”

Jason ignored him, still staring into space.

“Asano?”

Jason reached out and touched the stone again and darkness started spreading over it like a shadow was passing over. White stone became opaque, like smoked glass, with the blue, silver, and gold veins becoming twinkling lights within the darkness. The stone had turned completely dark and the other stones started following suit.

Mr North turned his head wildly, watching the stones change.

“What did you do?”

“I hate to break it to you, Mr North, but smugly thinking you know what the enemy you’re trying to turn into an ally will do is a good way to get slapped down. I learned that the hard way myself.”

Jason waved his arm and an obsidian portal arch rose up in the middle of the circle. The stones started to break down, dissolving into dust. The dust was drawn through the air, as if by a vacuum, getting sucked into the dark portal.

“WHAT DID YOU DO?”

“Since we won’t be needing them anymore,” Jason said as he picked up one of the wooden crates, “I’m just going pop these into the old dimensional space. Waste not, want not, yeah?”

Mr North looked on in horror as the stones crumbled away, while Jason started shoving crates into his inventory.

“You’ve ruined everything.”

“Oh, calm down. You wanted me to absorb the magic door, right? I’m absorbing the magic door.”

“You can’t just absorb it because you want to!”

“No, *you* can’t just absorb it because you want to. I’m a man of many talents. Cooking, absorbing magic doors...”

Jason frowned, pausing with another crate in his arms.

“Alright,” he acknowledged. “Two talents. And my sister is better at one of them, but still. I hope Kaito isn’t any good at absorbing magic doors. Probably not; that would be weird.”

The obsidian arch of the portal was slowly transmuting as it absorbed the dust from the stones, turning from pure black to a smoky crystal with blue, silver and gold shimmers within.

“Why are you talking nonsense?” Mr North asked. “This space is going to break down, and us with it!”

“Yeah? Hang on a bit.” Jason quickly stowed the last two crates, the last of the stones crumbling to nothing as he did. He then looked around.

“Seems fine to me.”

The ground lurched and the amber light started taking on streaks of red tint.

“Oh, there it is,” Jason said. “Come on; out we pop.”

He then stepped through the arch into which all the stones had vanished. Mr North looked around at the space unravelling around them and scrambled after him.

In the pentagonal room at the bottom of the shaft, Emi was running her fingers over the smooth marble, marvelling at the slick smoothness, almost devoid of friction.

“The wall is getting warmer,” she said.

“Oh?” Koya asked and the three Tiwari men put their hands to the wall.

“You’re right,” Denji said.

“Does that mean Mr Asano did something?” Itsuki asked.

“That’s what we came here for,” Denji said. “Lets hope he did it right.”

“The wall is changing colour,” Emi said, stepping back from it warily, the others joining her.

They watched as the white marble walls turned grey, as if the vital essence were being leeches from them. The apertures in the middle of each, still emitting a soft glow, started to dim. Once the light of the apertures had completely gone out and all the colour was gone from the walls, the walls crumbled like sand, spilling onto the floor. Behind them was the plain stone from which the shaft had been dug, identical to the stone under their feet.

In the middle of the room, a line of dark appeared on the floor, from which rose a portal arch, instead of the familiar obsidian, the arch was murky crystal with lights shining dimly within. The dark void filling the portal was the same, from which Jason stepped out to be caught in a limpet hug by his niece.

“Look out Moppet,” Jason said, lifting her up, still attached to him, and moving her out of the way. Another person stumbled out out, after which the portal disappeared into the floor.

Mr North’s expression became stern as he stood up straight, panning the room with a stern glare as he adjusted his tie and cuffs. The grinning, languid man Jason had met was nowhere to be seen, Mr North’s sharp eyes taking in the scene before settling on Jason.

“For all our sakes, Mr Asano,” he said, his voice gravel hard, “I hope you haven’t made a terrible mistake.”

“Caution has its place,” Jason said, “but the first step of doing the impossible is having the nuggets to try.”

“I will take my leave.”

“It won’t be today, Mr North,” Jason said, “but the day will come where you and I have a reckoning.”

“I know you like to be dramatic, Mr Asano, but you’ll find yourself with much bigger problems than me to deal with. Assuming you didn’t just ruin everything.”

Mr North directed his arms at the ground and threads of web shot from his sleeves. He used it to draw a complex sigil on the ground, which lit with pale blue light when it was completed. He stepped onto the sigil and it rose into the air, swiftly carrying Mr North up and into the shaft.

“Who was that?” Denji asked. “Where did he come from?”

“Magic Spider-Man?” Emi suggested.

“That was Mr North, the head of the EOA,” Jason explained.

“And you let him go?”

“He’s category four, Patriarch,” Jason said. “He let us go.”

“How can he be category four?” Koya asked. “How would he sustain himself?”

“He’s had access to the door for centuries. I imagine he has a stockpile of the objects the magical world will soon be fighting over.”