

Chapter 577

Authority

Dawn's dimensional vehicle, a garden cottage inside an orb, approached Jason's cloud building. Standing at the edge of the garden, Dawn looked at the building that was now an architectural chimera of fluffy white cloud house and stark, black temple. Despite being unable to extend her senses into the building and check on Jason, she had stayed away since warning his friends. She had gone further than she intended with them, fearing she had left enough pieces for them to turn suspicion into certainty. That could spell disaster for Jason when the time came.

As for the reason Dawn had become involved in affairs in the first place, things were going well. Jason had done something insane and almost gotten himself killed, but that was inevitable. It was the reason she had bargained for a single chance to intervene, even if she then spent it protecting the Storm Kingdom instead.

From a strategic perspective, she would have been better off losing the battle to win the war, as the survival of Rimaros was not required for the World-Phoenix's agenda to reach fruition. While she might be a servant of the World-Phoenix, however, she was still her own person, which was an independence the World-Phoenix valued in its servants. The World-Phoenix had selected Dawn to watch over Jason for this very reason; to help her to reconnect with her fading mortality.

Dawn was forced to admit that whatever forces he was involved with and powers he accrued, Jason was unrepentantly mortal. Immortality had led her to push aside the individual moments and the small pleasures. This strange man had grounded her, reminding her of how to live in the moment instead of looking only to the infinite distance. She had made impractical choices she never would have before, yet could not find it in herself to regret them.

Flying down from her dimensional vessel in the sky, Dawn alighted in front of the strange cloud building, on the grass between the building and the river. It had been largely churned to mud by the many feet that had surrounded the cloud house when events were at their most dramatic but, like Jason, the grass was slowly recovering. She walked towards the open arch leading inside, satisfied that her task for the World-Phoenix was almost done. Jason would ride out the rest of the monster surge in recovery, unable to give her any more outrageous surprises.

"What do you mean, you extra-absorbed them?" Dawn asked.

She was sitting in a simple, firm cloud construct chair while Jason was sprawled in a large, soft one that looked like a throne made of pudding.

“Well,” he said, looking sheepish. “You know how I absorbed the Builder’s magic door when I was only meant to use it, and then you used that as a basis for the magic bridge I was supposed to absorb?”

“Yes,” Dawn said, her voice heavy with suspicion.

“They were clanking around in my soul, doing their respective tasks, which is fine, I guess. But then, you know, stuff happened. And in the course of stuff happening, the two magic things kinds of got... broken down for parts.”

“Broken down for parts?”

“And looted.”

“Looted?”

“When you just keep repeating what I say in an increasingly angry tone, it makes me think that you’re angry.”

“Jason, what did you do?”

“That same thing I always do! I almost got killed, weird stuff happened and now I have to deal with it to save the world.”

“You’re saying that the bridge you need to build and the door you need to build it are gone.”

“Uh, yep.”

Dawn closed her eyes and rubbed her temples.

“I didn’t think diamond-rankers could get headaches,” she muttered.

“I imagine it’s psychosomatic, given the control essence users have over their autonomic...”

Jason trailed off as Dawn’s eyes opened to glare at him.

“Rhetorical question, fair enough,” he said.

Hunched over, looking down at the floor, she spoke quietly, her voice weary.

“Tell me exactly what happened,” she instructed. “Those objects both possessed vast amounts of power, along with other things that someone of your rank has no place knowing even exist.”

“Yeah, I kind of figured that out. Good news: I managed to loot an item from each that can probably help with building a magic bridge. I reckon the bunch of the stuff I’m not meant to know about went into those items instead of back into my soul. I figure they weren’t really meant to be there in the first place, so my soul spat them back out.”

“What items?”

“One is called a firmament bridge anchor. It sounds like exactly what we need. After all, the bridge is partly built already. What we need to do is anchor it on this side, right.”

Some of the tension left Dawn's shoulders.

“That's not what I would call good,” she said, “but it's not an unmitigated disaster. It complicates things, but it at least gives you a path forward. More importantly, it doesn't give you something you shouldn't have.”

Jason's thoughts immediately drifted to the astral throne and astral gate residing in his spirit realm, still unexamined.

“What do you mean?” he asked lightly.

“I'm going to tell you something that is far above your position in the power hierarchy of reality, Jason, although it is something you have been hovering around the edge of for some time. You know that the great astral beings make deals with one another. They have done so over you.”

“Yep.”

“The key to this is authority. To the great astral beings, authority is a much more expansive concept than it is to you or even to me. It does have the usual definition as a right to exercise power, but to them, it is also power itself, and far more than that. To a great astral being, authority is not just the right to act but the strength to. It is a currency to be paid and bargained with; a resource to be consumed. It is who they are, what they are and what they do. A god embodies a singular conception and remains essentially unchanging so long as the concept doesn't change. A god of the rivers will be altered if all the rivers dry up, but does not change as the waters pass into the sea. Compared to this, great astral beings are more transactional in their power, their areas of influence and even their very essence. They deal in pacts and bargains, with authority as coin of the realm.”

“I'm not entirely sure I follow.”

“Nor should you. If you claimed you did, you would either be a liar or simply wrong.”

“You're saying the Dao that can be spoken is not the true Dao?”

“Something like that. I wouldn't have expected religion from you.”

“Oh, I'm full of surprises, me.”

“Yes,” Dawn agreed in a disagreeable tone. “You are.”

She shook her head.

“The important thing you need to understand,” she continued, not letting him sidetrack her further, “is that the authority of great astral beings is not just what they have or what they use but what they are. Authority is their flesh and blood. Their DNA. Their souls.”

“They can trade their souls in chunks?”

“Yes.”

“Is that why the Builder keeps getting away with crap he really shouldn’t? He started off mortal instead of being made of this super authority, so the idea of pushing the boundaries of a deal or ignoring the authority of another isn’t so alien?”

“I cannot say for certain, but it seems likely. But that is not what is important.”

“You realise that the very concept of transactional authority essentially means corruption, right?”

“Be careful where you tread, Asano.”

“The artefacts,” Jason said, his voice rising half an octave in his rush to change the subject. “They had some of that authority in them, didn’t they?”

“Yes,” Dawn said. “And that was acceptable, even in your soul, so long as those artefacts were operating as intended. The door was never meant to be absorbed, but part of the deal to provide the bridge resolved that. Using the bridge would have eliminated the authority within the door and within itself once your task was complete.”

“And now the authority is in these items I’ve looted and the programming your boss and Builder put is gone? I basically reformatted the computers they built, stripped them down for parts and bunked off with all the RAM sticks? Now I’m running around loose with all the power of that authority, like a monkey with an assault rifle.”

“That monstrous chimera of an analogy is not entirely inaccurate. Somehow.”

“So, why aren’t there diamond-rank leg-breakers coming to take the super authority back?”

“Because the great astral beings don’t know what you’ve done yet. You have yet to leave your spirit domain.”

“They really can’t see in here, then. Good to know.”

“Show me the items,” Dawn told him. “If the authority they hold truly has been condensed from the artefacts, it’s likely it took the form of items because ungoverned authority held by you might kill you.”

“Might?”

“It may surprise you, Mr Asano, to learn that this is my first time seeing a silver-ranker running around with unattended chunks of great astral being power. I’m not entirely sure what will happen.”

“They aren’t going to tolerate me having any of their secret sauce though, are they?”

“No, Jason. They will not. It will be unacceptable to any of them, not just the World-Phoenix and the Builder. I suspect you may be safe from the World-Phoenix, however, if

the item you looted from the bridge is what I think. We should start with you showing me these items.”

Jason invited Dawn to a party so he could display his inventory through the party interface power.

“Can you read the description?” Jason asked her of the Firmamental Bridge Anchor.

“No, but I know this item. As I hoped, it’s something you can use to establish the bridge, and doing so will consume the authority in the item. The great astral beings will have no qualms with you possessing it because it remains single-use by nature. Once the task you have is fulfilled, the authority will be spent and gone. There will be problems with using it, compared to the bridge you destroyed to get it, but we can look at those later.”

Jason pulled up the description of the other item, the fundamental realm authority token.

“This is a problem,” Dawn said immediately. “You can’t have this.”

“I kind of had a feeling.”

“You will need to give it back. You do have some leverage, however.”

“Oh?”

“The fact that you have this is a major demonstration of the Builder’s failure. Your inconsequential stature means that all the blame for any of his authority falling into your hands is entirely placed on him.”

“But they’ll still shred me into my component particles for having it though, won’t they?”

“Yes, which is why you need to give it back. But because the Builder is in an awkward position, you can ask for some concessions from him.”

Jason nodded.

“I’ll give it some thought,” he said. “The great astral beings will know I have this as soon as I take it outside, right?”

“Or when I go outside. The World-Phoenix will know because I know.”

“Fair enough, but let’s put a pin in that and swing back to the complications with establishing the bridge. While I’m glad I didn’t ruin the whole plan, surely I put a dent in it. Starting with the fact that even if I didn’t give away this authority thing of the Builder’s, I don’t have a way back into the fundamental realm-space. I guess that’s the first concession I ask for.”

“Yes. That is a problem with an easy solution, as you only need access once to establish the anchor. The larger problem is the bridge itself.”

“I have the magic thing. You just said I could keep it.”

“That can anchor the bridge, but you still need to complete its construction. The bridge items I gave you would allow you to do that task, but now you will need to find a way to construct it yourself.”

“Can’t you show me how to do that?”

“Jason, my grasp of astral magic is formidable, but you have taken an already intricate situation and made it considerably worse. It may surprise you to learn that my expertise does not extend to building a bridge between a pair of worlds illicitly modified from the creation of their respective universes and connected through a link that was then tampered with and left to grow unstable over the course of centuries until those modifications were mostly undone by someone who barely understands what he’s doing and then used the link as a basis to build half of an astral bridge he also doesn’t understand with a magical artefact he accidentally digested and now can’t use to finish the job.”

“So, ‘no,’ is what you’re saying.”

“That is correct, Jason,” she said, biting off each word like they were the heads of small animals. “I’m saying no.”

“Good thing you don’t breathe or that would have been rough. Still, you have a plan, right? I mean, I could make a plan, but you’ve probably heard about my plans. It’s usually a two-steps-forward-one-step-back scenario. And the last step is onto a landmine.”

“As always seems to be the case with you, Jason, you are both the problem and the solution.”

“Which is what’s going on with my plans, which I personally think—”

“The messengers,” Dawn said, cutting him off.

“The messengers?”

“The messengers are the best practitioners of dimensional magic that I am aware of. I suspect that much of the magic that the Builder cult has been using comes from them, as part of whatever bargain brought them to this world.”

“And they have the magic I need?”

“Their strongest magic – the magic that allows them to stage invasions across dimensions – is predicated on the trait that makes them unique as a species,” Dawn explained. “Dimensional travel is exceedingly difficult. The reason the messengers can do it so well is that their gestalt bodies can endure dimensional forces that even others with astral affinities, like celestines, cannot. This means that they can afford to travel via dimensional magic that other species would not survive.”

“You’re saying that their knowledge of dimensional magic is high, but their dimensional magic is crude.”

“Crude?” Dawn asked. “We’re talking about dimensional magic that silver-rankers can use. That transport thousands of people between realities. You have no idea of the refinement required to perform that kind of magic with any less power than the magical equivalent of a sun.”

“Alright then,” Jason said. “They know their stuff. You think their theories will help be repair this bridge?”

“You should hope so,” Dawn said. “Otherwise, the World-Phoenix will be forced to take more forceful measures.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning that after what you accomplished on Earth, she can send people to fix this. If she does, however, it will not be with finesse. Imagine preventing a teacup from falling off a shelf by drilling a hole in it and bolting it to the wall.”

“I take it that Earth is the teacup?”

“Yes.”

“Your boss doesn’t have anyone with finesse?”

“She doesn’t have anyone steeped in this from the beginning. Like it or not, Jason, your fingerprints are all over the half-completed astral bridge. It’s such a mess now that anyone else will have to bulldoze what’s there and build over the top.”

“Then how do I get these messengers to teach me their magic?”

“I have no idea. As far as I am aware, they won’t. Fortunately, this world is currently host to a great number of them.”

“Which is awfully convenient. If they weren’t around, you’d send me off on some other errand that would probably kill me, right?”

“Yes. But as they are here, you can ask them for access to their magic.”

“By which you mean ‘beat them up and take whatever magic theory they have so Clive and I can reverse engineer it,’” Jason said.

“See?” Dawn asked. “You’re on the right path already.”

“Oh, that’s terrific. Fighting some interdimensional threat in order to save the Earth because a bunch of transcendent beings have been messing with it. And of course, they refuse to help fix it because of their own nonsense rules or just being pricks in general. I can’t possibly imagine what that’ll be like.”

“Sarcasm doesn’t become you, Jason. You lack Neil’s bitter flair.”

Jason pushed himself out of the chair, reached for an object in his inventory and pulled it out. He snarled through the pain as he circulated his mana to do so until it appeared in his hand. A brown stone tablet, it had an image of a world engraved into it and no other features.

“Ow. I knew pulling stuff out of my inventory would sting to buggery.”

Jason started hobbling towards the door.

“Where are you going?” Dawn asked as she followed.

“To give this back,” he said. “You said I have to. Should give the people still watching this place a good show.”

“We should discuss what you’re going to ask for.”

“I know what I’m going to ask for.”

“I can help you—”

“No, you can't, Dawn. We both know that.”

He flashed her a bright smile.

“You've helped me too many times already. I know you've been pushing the boundaries of whatever deals you've been making.”

“So has the Builder.”

“But will your boss let you get away with what he does?”

“No,” she admitted.

“I have to deal with the Builder, Dawn. I have to handle the messengers and I have to save the world. Again. And that’s okay. Interdimensional heroics are kind of my thing.”

She let out an exasperated groan as she followed Jason’s slow progress down the main stairs of the temple.

“You'll have to leave your spirit domain for the great astral beings to sense that manifested authority you're holding. Be careful what you say outside of your domain because there will be many eavesdroppers.”

They reached the open arch that marked the edge of the cloud temple and Jason's spirit domain. Jason paused at the threshold.

“Okay,” he said. “So, I step out and wait for some Builder lackey to turn up and repo this thing?”

“Essentially, yes.”

“And we can't discuss anything delicate outside of the spirit domain?”

“That’s right.”

“Good to know. By the way, I have an astral throne and astral gate now.”

Jason stepped out of his spirit domain.

