

Chapter 703

Primary Purpose

Jason and Gary were standing outside the forge Jason had conjured up in his soul space for Gary to practise his craft. In this space, Jason could conjure up countless materials, including exceedingly rare ones, for Gary to consume. Gary had even secured samples of the materials he wanted to work with so that Jason could accurately reproduce their nature and properties.

It was a level of resource even massive crafting guilds could not offer. Attempts had been made to create specialised mirage chambers for simulated crafting, but the results had never been worth the expenditure.

Gary's forge was a modest building of light-coloured stone. He and Jason leaned against the outside wall, holding fruit drinks that Jason had conjured up. From a magical perspective, they were identical to spirit coins, simply in the shape of delicious tropical beverages in coconut shells with colourful straws and tiny umbrellas. Gary's was significantly larger than Jason's.

"I know you're not happy I have them here," Jason said as they watched a trio of messengers flying through the air in the distance. "Most of the team has been giving me the stink-eye over it. I've fortunately not had to run into Carlos while I'm hiding out in here. For a healer, that guy carries an astounding amount of hate for messengers."

"I'm not a vindictive person," Gary said, "but I can see his point. I saw what they came to this city to do. I saw them doing it; there was only so much I could stop. I don't see how they deserve to live. What do we get from keeping them alive beyond more cruelty and death?"

"I'm trying to figure that out. Can you tolerate it if I forgive them?"

"They don't deserve forgiveness."

"Probably not. But what if I do it anyway?"

Gary sighed, then took a long, loud slurp of his drink. Jason didn't push for an answer, waiting until the lion man was ready to talk.

"When two sides hate each other," Gary said, "There's never going to be peace until someone lets go of that hate. There will always be reasons to hold onto it — good reasons — but then nothing changes. But it can't be one-sided, or it won't work. It can start with one side, but the other still has to meet them halfway. Are these winged bastards going to meet you halfway, Jason?"

"These ones just might. Maybe. And if we're really, really lucky, they may get more of their kind to do the same."

"In time to get them to leave my world?"

"Definitely not. It's more of a planting seeds situation. Ugh, now I'm making plant metaphors. Did you know the messengers are plants?"

"They don't look like plants."

"I know, right? But they grow on trees. They're basically evil fruit. Like broccoli."

"Broccoli is not a fruit," Gary pointed out.

"Exactly," Jason said. "Imagine delicious chunks of pineapple, dusted with cinnamon and salt, and then roasted until they're caramelised and tender before having a little bit of lime squeezed over them. Now imagine what you get instead is broccoli. That's what messengers are."

"Please tell me that pineapple thing is what you're making for lunch."

"No, I'm cooking broccoli."

"What?"

"See? They're the worst."

Jason rubbed his temples as Shade set a cup of tea on the wrought metal picnic table he was sitting at. They were in a small clearing in a garden that had a natural and wild feel to it, inside Jason's soul realm. To get some peace and quiet, no one else in the soul realm could detect it, to the point that the realm would change to lead off anyone that approached. Only Jason and his familiars had access, although Colin was still in a cocoon and Gordon was elsewhere in the realm.

"Thank you," Jason said. It had been a long day of mostly minor frustrations, from adjusting the cloud palace to dealing with politics. Now that he had decided to start resolving his issues with the Adventure Society and the diamond-rankers, Vidal Ladiv was shuttling between the cloud palace and the society campus with messages.

There had been bright moments, however. Acquiring magical materials for personal use was still almost impossible in Yaresh, with everything being commandeered for the reconstruction. It had taken weeks for Clive to collect the materials to resummon Onslow, but Jason left the reunited pair happily sharing a salad.

Another positive was the Adventure Society branch director throwing his support behind Jason in the face of the diamond-rankers. Jason suspected it was some local power play, but he wouldn't turn down the assistance. Vidal Ladiv insisted that the

director's motive was genuine gratitude for Jason's role in getting the Builder to depart early. Jason found his inability to believe in simple gratitude a little saddening.

Jason's plan for the diamond-rankers worked best if their back and forth came out in rumours rather than a public display where things could go wrong. His 'concession' to the diamond-rankers proved enough to save face and keep them off his back, at least for the moment. If he failed to generate any actionable intelligence from the messengers, their patience would not last. The branch director would make sure the right rumours started spreading, along with acting as a buffer between Jason and the diamond-rankers.

The Yaresh diamond-rankers were not the only ones Jason had to deal with. He had sensed the periodic attempts to interfere with his cloud palace and discovered a third diamond-ranker using some manner of device. Jason quickly realised she was the person who had created his cloud flask in the first place, having arrived in the city and now living with Emir.

"I find myself in a strange state of mind," Jason said to his familiar. "I don't have trouble filling my days, yet it also feels like I'm just waiting around. Waiting for diamond-rankers and/or the Voice of the Will to make a move. Waiting for a genius idea on how to deal with the messengers I've got stashed away. Waiting for Colin to emerge as a pretty, pretty butterfly."

"Even so, Mr Asano, you have had at least some time to stop and contemplate some of the issues surrounding you."

"Yeah. The gap between my spiritual development and my essence abilities is becoming an increasing problem. I almost want to go back to Earth and drain vampires until I'm gold-rank."

"Perhaps you should. I imagine the vampires have gone to war by now. If you prioritise claiming messenger dimension magic, you will likely be able to ride the link back to your homeworld."

"You think this Jes Fin Kaal will hand over what I need?"

"I suspect that it is less important to her than to you, Mr Asano. Exactly the kind of bait to get you to participate in whatever scheme she has planned."

"Yeah, well, we'll need to stop whatever that plan is before we even think about Earth."

"There is one thing we should discuss, Mr Asano. We spoke on it briefly when things were more chaotic, and now we have time to talk it through properly."

"Oh?" Jason asked, taking some leftover roasted pineapple from his inventory. He set the plate in front of him, next to his cup of tea.

"Do you recall our talk about your former ability, the quest system?"

"I do," Jason said. "We were talking about how my own ability managed to know things that I didn't."

"I have a suspicion as to the magical sense at the heart of that ability, and what may have happened to that sense when the ability evolved."

Jason leaned back in his chair.

"Do tell."

"There is a rare phenomenon I have not witnessed myself, at least that I am aware of, until you. It would be easy to miss as it is something that does not show itself overtly. Most never heard of it, and many that have don't believe that it's real."

"What is it?"

"It has many names. Eyes of the crucible. Destiny magic. Fate senses. Way of the crossroads. Whatever it is called, the effect is the same. It allows any who possess it to unconsciously sense events of importance. Then, they make a choice without realising it, whether to seek those events out or avoid them. Think of it like hearing a gunshot, and your instincts telling you to run toward or away from the sound. It is rarely so overt, however, with the person often not realising they are even making a choice."

"Okay," Jason said, brow creasing as his mind went over what Shade had just told him. "I have about a million questions. I'm going to start with the idea that I've been running around, guided by my unconscious mind this whole time. If that's true, have I made any real choices, or has this thing been leading me by the nose from the beginning?"

"It has not, Mr Asano. It is not a controlling force but a sense of where important events could potentially take place. For you, it was a quest system. It could have led you safely out of that maze in which you found yourself upon arriving in this world. Instead, it sent you directly to a Builder cultist and his cannibal family. It also sent you to Mr Remove, Mr Xandier and Miss Farrah. It set you on a path that led you here."

"But it could have gone the other way. Kept me out of all the trouble I keep landing in, over and over."

"Yes. You didn't realise it in your conscious mind, but you were choosing, over and over, whether to place yourself in safety or a crucible. And I think we know which way you chose, every time."

"Why? Jason asked. "What is this destiny sense for? How does it even work, mechanically? I mean, do potentially important events let off fate waves or something? And how did I end up with this power or sense or whatever it is?"

"I do not know how it works," Shade said. "It is rare enough that I do not know of it ever being studied."

"So, don't tell Clive is what you're saying."

"That may be best," Shade agreed. "I could only guess at the mechanism, but I would imagine that it measures probabilities in some manner. As for how you came to possess it, I may be able to answer that. So far as I am aware, the conditions for developing fate senses are both specific and unusual. First, it requires a soul at a near-inert stage."

"Near inert?"

"Normal or iron-rank. Perhaps bronze. Surely, by your level of development, you have realised that your soul is not growing stronger. If that were the case, you would never have possessed the power to fend off the Builder."

"Yeah, I get it," Jason said. "Ranking up just lets me tap into more of the soul's potential."

"Precisely."

"Is that why I wasn't harmed as badly as before when I overcharged my aura with Gordon's ritual? I've been awakening my soul so much outside of my essence abilities that I can take the strain now? My soul and my body are the same thing, after all."

"I have no knowledge of the likelihood of that being the case. It is as valid a hypothesis as any I could formulate with the information I have. But to return to the topic at hand, the first requirement of fate senses is a near-inert soul. That soul needs to be in an unusually malleable state."

"Such as when it's been yanked through the astral by a magical phenomenon, destroying the body it was attached to, and it's reworking itself from a human into an outworlder."

"Just so, Mr Asano. And the third requirement is that it needs to have an extremely close encounter with a maximally powerful force. A god or a great astral being. Certain astral phenomena that you are not allowed to know about would also qualify."

"A great astral being like the World-Phoenix. If it was to, say, pay close enough attention to the soul that it gave them something to take with it. A portion of the World-Phoenix's power in the form of a token."

"Yes. The soul, being in a state of flux and coming into contact with that level of power, may develop fate senses as a reflexive defence mechanism. In your case, it manifested in the quest system."

"And it's programmed to prompt either fight or flight," Jason realised. "Depending on whether your instincts are to run from that power or to match it."

"Yes," Shade said.

"And that's why I always treat authority figures like they don't matter. It's my fate senses."

"No, Mr Asano. Fate senses are just that: senses. You are responsible for your own behaviour. You cannot blame fate senses for your actions. Even when they seem to guide you in a certain direction, it is you who unconsciously chooses the direction. The senses themselves only present you with the option. Fight or flight, as you put it."

"Alright," Jason said, sipping at his tea as he processed all the new information. "So, it isn't some inherent destiny pushing me around. It's just me choosing to be in all the situations I've complained about being in for the last half-decade."

"To a degree. I believe that these senses still guide you, but remember that the ability through which they manifested, the quest system, evolved. It stopped pushing you."

"Why would it stop?" Jason asked.

"Think of when it evolved, Mr Asano. When you were iron-rank and you chose to fight a silver-rank monster you could not possibly defeat yet could have easily fled. Instead, you chose to fight. You never got another quest after that.

"The waterfall village," Jason said. "When I had to stall out the elemental tyrant while the villagers evacuated."

"You didn't have to, Mr Asano, and that is the point; you chose to. And you received what is, to this day, your largest soul scar in the process. Then, shortly thereafter, you encountered another maximally powerful being. This time you defied it, and your power evolved. Your soul was once again in flux, but you no longer needed the defensive mechanism of the fate senses. What you needed was power on a level of the Builder. Which, of course you couldn't muster at iron-rank."

"Then what did the fate sense turn into? The ability that replaced the quest system rewards chasing danger, but doesn't guide me to it."

"I believe it is largely dormant. It may be guiding you in more subtle ways, but I think it was waiting. You had Gordon, at that stage, and I suspect your fate senses evolved into a different kind of perception; the ability to sense Gordon's potential for the magic he can tap into. You couldn't use it immediately because Gordon still couldn't use it. His vessel was too low-ranked. But then, he bound himself permanently to you, and did so after his vessel was two ranks higher. He still was not high enough rank to use that magic normally, but you could sense it, allowing him to tap into his own potential through you."

"And what is this magic?"

“I did not recognise it, at first. He has only used it at the absolute lowest level and it shouldn't be possible for him to use it at all yet, to the point that the possibility didn't occur to me.”

“Why is this what my fate sense turned into?”

“I suspect that it is a natural evolution of the fate senses to move from guiding behaviour to granting access to higher-order power when the opportunity presents. You proved that not only were you resolved to confront a force on the level of the Builder, but you had potential access to at least one power that operates on the same scale he does: intrinsic-mandate magic.”

“That's what it's called, Gordon's magic?”

“Yes.”

“And it operates on the same scale as a great astral being?”

“It is a form of magic that often involves the expenditure of authority. It lacks the versatility of the magic you are familiar with, and is meant for shaping physical reality, not being used within it. This is the magic the Builder uses to forge worlds. That the World-Phoenix used to remake the dimensional barrier of Earth to cut it off from magic. If you think of all intrinsic-mandate magic as different kinds of guns, the power Gordon has used thus far—”

“Is a water pistol?”

“No, Mr Asano. It is a piece of paper with the word 'bang' written on it. This magic is typically employed by transcendent entities and sometimes their diamond-rank agents. Miss Dawn used it when she annihilated the Builder city fortress.”

“She used authority for that?”

“No, Mr Asano. She used her star seed to tap into the most meagre trickle of the World-Phoenix's power. If she had used actual authority, the results would not have been so modest.”

“Modest? She glassed an area the size of a state.”

“Which is why the great astral beings would not allow you to possess loose authority, Mr Asano.”

“Yeah, well... fair enough. Can astral kings use this magic?”

“Yes, as can their diamond-ranked Voices of the Will, if they allow it. If you can complete your transformation into an astral king, you may have an easier time tapping into Gordon's magic potential, even before you surpass diamond rank.”

“Why does Gordon even have that potential?”

"I do not know. Perhaps it is the connection of his kind to the Sundered Throne or the All-Devouring Eye. But those are topics that I will not expound upon. Not until you are stronger."

"You think I can't handle it?"

"I think the wider cosmos has etiquette, and that etiquette exists for a reason. I will not violate it to introduce you to things you have no power to influence. Unless you order me to do so."

"No," Jason said. "If you say that's for when I'm a big boy, I trust you. I know that if ignorance will blindside me, you'll warn me ahead of time."

"Thank you, Mr Asano."

Once again Jason paused, eating pineapple and drinking tea as he pondered the ramifications of what Shade had told him.

"The World-Phoenix," he said. "She had to know what she was doing to me."

"Yes, Mr Asano. In fact, I imagine that instilling you with fate senses was a primary purpose, not a side effect. She wanted you drawn into events. And if her contact with you left you a gibbering wreck, she could always explore other avenues. Dawn made it clear enough that you were simply one path the World-Phoenix was exploring."

"Hold on," Jason said. "What's this gibbering wreck business?"

"The conditions that generate fate senses are quite extreme, Mr Asano. I mentioned how souls develop those senses as a defence mechanism. This is the same process that alters a soul in the wake of spirit trauma. And like spirit trauma, not everyone comes back stronger. Some are ruined, their own souls poisoning their minds, rendering them insensible."

"Oh, that's great. Remind me to tell the World-Phoenix to bog off."

"No, Mr Asano."