

## Chapter 772

### Everything in My Power

Despite being deep underground, the growth chamber was filled with light. Level after level of stone lattices and catwalks were overgrown with luminescent flora creating a glorious light show. Jason's soul realm had underground areas with glowing fungus but this place put them to shame. Moss, vines and fungal growth climbed over everything, shedding light in every shade of the rainbow to weave a kaleidoscopic tapestry.

Miniature aqueducts carried water down through the chamber in a complex series of troughs and channels. Water could be seen running off the edge of troughs to splash down in pools that emptied into more channels, spraying up mist in the process. That mist spread out, floating through the chamber to leave the abundant flora with a patina of dew.

"I never imagined something like this down here," Jason said, his voice filled with wonder. "How does it work when the magic here is filled with fire and magma affinity? Where does the water come from, all the way down here? That's magic making it mist that way, yes?"

He was walking through the growth chamber with Lorenn, the leader of the brightheart people. Three of her aides travelled a respectful distance behind.

"You are aware of what a natural array is?" Lorenn asked.

"A bunch of essences, awakening stones and quintessence that just happened to manifest over time in such a way that complex magical interactions are generated."

"Yes. While most of the components of the array are fire, earth, ash and similar types, at the heart of the array there are three essences that create balance. One plant, one life and one water essence. You are no doubt wondering how such essences could manifest so far underground."

"That's exactly what I was wondering, yes."

"Our scholars theorise that these were the final elements of the array to manifest. The idea is that the rest of the array was in place and the components were already interacting, and that created a magic imbalance. As more magic manifested, that imbalance created an environment where those manifestations took forms that rectified that imbalance. There's a wellspring of water that is conjured into being underneath the array and passes through natural tunnels in the stone, ending up in the growth chambers."

"So, these growth chambers formed naturally, rather than being dug out?" Jason asked.

“Originally, yes, although we expanded them all. The citadel chamber and the growth chambers were the only natural ones, although we expanded them all. The pillars in the citadel chamber were already there, although they were solid when our ancestors found them. After the citadel was rather disastrously brought into being in the middle of them, they were hollowed out, reinforced and shaped. That was where most of our people lived until our population grew and we eventually created the Great Chamber.”

“How did that work?” Jason asked. “Where was all that rock displaced to?”

“It was used to fill the tunnel our ancestors used to arrive here in the first place. They came in not straight down but at a long angle from the west to avoid the people in the surface region directly above us. Our people had discovered the natural array and wanted to build a home around it. They feared those without elements in their blood would see only something to be exploited, so we reached this place with the elves above never even realising.”

“I’m pretty sure that was the right call,” Jason said.

“The opening of the Great Chamber was the beginning of our peak as a civilisation,” she said proudly, then bowed her head. Her voice became a mournful whisper.

“We call it the death chamber now.”

Jason grimaced.

“I am left in awe at what you’ve accomplished here,” he said. “Hanging gardens of light hidden impossibly deep underground. Even in a world of magic, this place is a wonder. But it feels wrong to take joy in what you’ve made here when your people are surviving on the ragged edge.”

“Do you truly believe that you can help us?” Lorenn asked.

“That’s the plan,” Jason said, doing his best to offer a reassuring smile. “Once you’ve saved the world a few times, you start to wonder what’s next. Saving whole species makes sense.”

Lorenn raised her eyebrows sceptically.

“I know I can come off as flippant,” Jason said apologetically. “But while my manner might sometimes make it seem otherwise, I promise my actions are undertaken with the utmost seriousness. I will do everything in my power to help your people. And between you and me, that is a lot of power.”

“You’ll have to forgive my doubts,” Lorenn said. “It’s hard to imagine a silver-ranker saving us all. What you describe doing seems... unlikely.”

“I know. It took me a long time to get used to it as well. As for addressing your doubts, would you be willing to take a look at my aura if I completely opened it up to you? I don’t know how sensitive the aura senses of your people are.”

“Not as sharp as an essence user,” Lorenn said, “but adequate. My understanding is that our ability to sense magic rather than auras is stronger, especially with elemental magic.”

“That makes sense. I’m going to open up my soul, so please take a look. You’ll have to push your senses in because I don’t want to expose everyone else here in the chamber. It would probably kill some of the children.”

Lorenn raised her eyebrows again and Jason gave her a wry smile.

“You’ll see.”

He felt her senses make an exploratory push into his aura and opened a gate in the restraints every essence user employed to hold back their auras. He watched Lorenn's eyes grow wider as she explored the strange and twisty depths of the power that reflected Jason's soul. He smiled until her expression turned from shock to horror.

“What are you?” she half-whispered as she withdrew her senses.

“Ouch. I’m in a transitional period. But you sensed the power, right? I can’t whip it out and slap people in the face with it, but it’s impressive to look at. Well, I suppose I can, kind of. My aura is only an echo of that power, but even that is enough to be used as a weapon.”

“This place you said you can take my people. You called it a soul realm.”

“I’ve called it a lot of things. But yeah.”

“And this soul realm is yours.”

“Yes.”

“Meaning that it is shaped by what I just saw?”

“Strictly speaking, what you just saw is shaped by it. But more or less, yes.

Councilwoman, I want to be clear about what I’m proposing before we move forward. The soul realm isn’t just some dimensional space that’s influenced by my soul. It is my soul. If your people enter it, they’ll be inside my soul. Which means, amongst other things, that they will be completely in my power. It doesn’t matter if they’re gold-rank, or what abilities they wield. The moment they arrive, my power over them becomes absolute, utter and inescapable. I could kill them in an instant or trap them there for eternity.”

“Are you trying to convince me to not do this?”

“I just want you to understand exactly what you’re leading your people into. I’m essentially asking you to put the fate of your entire people in the hands of someone you’ve

known for all of a few hours. Someone who could easily annihilate them once you have. That's not a revelation I want you having when half of your people are already in my soul realm and some kind of riot starts."

"But do we genuinely have a choice?" Lorenn asked. "If we're choosing between no chance of survival and betting everything on a stranger, that's not a choice at all."

"You could wait it out. Hope we can beat the messengers and lead you all out of here."

"But you think we'll all get dragged into this transformation zone you talked about."

"Yes," Jason said. "I think this whole underground region will be dragged into the fragmented dimensional space that is going to form, and everyone here with it. But if your people are in my soul, they'll be protected. Not to mention having air to breathe and food to eat. Which brings us to the reason we're here."

Lorenn nodded, then waved to the aides trailing them. Two were bronze-rank while the third was a silver who approached in response to Lorenn's gesture.

"You want samples of all the plants we have here," Lorenn said to Jason.

"Yes," he said, nodding his confirmation. "I can reproduce the plants in here. Organics are a lot trickier than inert material, though. I'll need as much information to understand what I'm dealing with as I can get. My understanding is that your people need food rich not just in magic but magic with a high elemental affinity."

"We don't strictly need it, but it's vastly more efficient. Our normal and iron-rankers can get by on ordinary food. Our bronze-rankers as well, although they need a lot of it. We wouldn't have had nearly enough for everyone if that's what we were using. There may also be some sickness if it's not elementally rich, especially given how weak and starving our population is."

"I can work with that," Jason assured her. "To make sure I can produce what you need, what I need are samples of everything, and not just of the plants. The soil, the stone, the water. Any fertiliser and anything else you use. The more accurately I can replicate this growth chamber, the better I'll be able to produce food that will sustain your people. The further I am from understanding their needs, the longer it will take to figure out how to produce something they can consume without exacerbating any issues."

"This is Hilda," Lorenn said, introducing the aide. "She'll see to it that you get what you need."

Hilda was a magma type, her hair a mix of obsidian black and glowing orange. Her eyes and skin markings shifted between glossy black and glowing orange in a slow, heartbeat pulse. She looked young to Jason's eyes, around twenty or even younger, which

was highly impressive for silver-rank. He knew that rank and species difference could easily be fooling him, but her aura had a feel to it he associated with youth.

“I greet you, Lord Asano,” she said.

“Oh, none of that,” Jason said. “I’m not even Lord of the Dance, although I can twinkle my toes when the occasion calls for it. I’m Jason. Call me that and we’ll get on just fine. Unless you’re a terrible person or something, which would be unfortunate. I’m sure you’re great.”

“I’m going to go,” Lorenn told Jason. “I’ve been away from my duties too long as it is. Hilda, I was told by Mr Asano’s companions that if he starts getting... odd, I should just nod and wait for him to finish, then only address anything that actually made sense. I pass that advice on to you.”

“Who told you that?” Jason asked. “It was Clive, wasn’t it? He was the one that came with us to meet you.”

“Before I go,” Lorenn said, ignoring Jason’s questions, “I do have a concern about something you’ve told me here. If this soul realm is actually within your soul, what happens to the people in it when you die?”

“Die permanently? I honestly have no idea.”

Jason moved away from Hilda and tapped a pin in his robes, activating a privacy screen in which Lorenn moved to join him.

“I have a couple of deaths in me before we have to worry about what happens to the people in my soul.”

“A couple of deaths?”

“You know how vampires work? Feeding on life force they can use to recover even from what should be thoroughly lethal injuries?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’m kind of like that, except I devour the life force of messengers and use it to resurrect myself. It takes a lot of them to get a whole resurrection’s worth, but the one thing we’re not short on down here is messengers. My concerns are failing, not dying.”

“You are a strange creature, Jason Asano.”

“So people tell me. I’d appreciate you keeping the resurrection thing to yourself, by the way. I normally only share those details with my closest companions, but with the trust you’ll need to put in me, I think you deserve some trust in return. It’s the only assurance I have to offer.”

“Then I thank you for that.”

Lorenn departed, leaving Jason with Hilda.

“What quantities are you going to need for each of your samples?” Hilda asked him.

“Well, for the plants I’ll need one full plant of each type, including root systems and whatever it’s growing out of. I noticed that some of your plants look to be growing straight out of the rock...”

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Clive and his ritualists were confident they could create a zone where Jason could open his portal but were unsure how long they could maintain it. With almost ten thousand people to move, from across three chambers, getting them to the portal would be a massive logistical challenge.

The bottom of the citadel chamber, amongst the pillars, was chosen as the portal site. It was the easiest place to funnel people from the growth chambers, and those in the citadel chamber would only need to descend, not climb their way up. Even so, the citadel chamber posed several challenges, the biggest being the citadel itself.

The citadel wasn’t well designed for one person to navigate, let alone thousands at once. More historical artefact than functional building, the only practical way to move from the upper pillar to the lower was a series of elevating platforms that moved around the outside of the building. They were not even close to sufficient to move the numbers required in a short time frame.

The pillars faced similar, but less urgent issues. They all had elevating-platform shafts, along with stairwells, but they were not designed to move the entire populace all at once. One bad incident when every level of the stairs was packed with people could spell disaster.

The decision was made to take the time to get the populace down to ground level, lined up and ready to go before the portal was opened. The major risk was what happened if the portal couldn’t take everyone at once and there was a lengthy break as the elemental energy was purged again. As more and more people arrived at ground level, it increasingly became a sports arena with no food stands and no public bathrooms.

Jason watched proceedings from the air, sitting in his cloud chair. He sighed.

“A lot of people are going to poop in my soul.”