

## Chapter 849

### The Work of Higher Beings

The tree was quarter again the height of Everest, clouds hiding most of it. The battle that had been waged around it was over, leaving little indication that it had even taken place. The roots of the tree, being impervious to damage, were untouched by the conflict. The earth they were buried in was a different story; countless destructive powers had churned it up and scorched it to black dust. At a glance, though, it looked like ordinary black dirt.

The thousands of messenger-shaped anomaly corpses had turned to rainbow smoke, mostly through the loot powers of various adventurers. That loot had been packed up and hauled away in dimensional bags and personal storage spaces. Although too many of the expedition would never make it home, those that did would bring treasure troves with them.

At the base of the tree, two cloud flasks were immeasurable specks in comparison to the massive trunk. Just as hard to see were the narrow streams of cloud-substance they were spraying into the air. The cloud material snaked up the trunk in two streams until they reached the lowest level of actual clouds, around a kilometre up.

The cloud material condensed into a pair of building complexes, highly distinct from one another. The larger of the pair was a single enormous building; an ostentatious sky palace. The other was smaller and hard to spot at a distance. A series of smaller structures, rather than a single massive one, they took on the shape, colour and texture of wood. The rustic complex was made up of modest treehouses, connected by rope bridges and crude counterweight elevators.

Emir and Jason were floating in the air, watching the buildings as they neared completion. Emir was standing on a cloud that, being an essence ability, was superior to personal travel devices that looked similar. Jason held himself aloft with his aura. The icy wind that came with their altitude whipped his hair about.

“Really?” Emir asked as he cast his eyes over Jason’s portion of the complex. “Treehouses and elevators that pull people up from the ground using rope? I appreciate the rustic appeal but you could at least put in a proper elevating platform. There’s something to be said for efficiency, you know.”

“There’s also something to be said for subtlety,” Jason said, looking to the sunset blaze shining through the clouds of Emir’s cloud palace.

“We’re building cloud palaces on the side of a tree taller than most mountains,” Emir pointed out. “If that’s not a time for showmanship, when is? Also, of all the people who might lecture me about grandiosity, it shouldn’t be the man who carved a mountain into the shape of his own head.”

“There’s a time and a place for everything,” Jason said, his expression the picture of innocence. Emir shook his head.

“Oh, look: mine’s finished,” Emir said. “I’m going to go in and poke around. How is it that mine is bigger, yet yours takes longer to finish?”

Jason nodded sagely.

“You did finish first,” he acknowledged. “Constance said you like to do that. Poor woman.”

“Wait, what did my wife say?”

“Oh, look,” Jason said. “Mine just finished. I’m going to go inside and poke around.”

Jason floated toward his cloud building, Emir following after.

“Hey! You have to tell me what my wife said!”

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With everyone gathered up into the two cloud palaces, preparations for Jason to begin in earnest were complete. Jason had given everyone a choice between riding it out in his soul realm and remaining in the cloud palaces. Most had chosen the cloud palaces, whether out of curiosity or from reluctance to enter Jason’s soul any more than necessary.

Jason had one last thing to do before engaging with the task of re-integrating the transformation zone with normal reality. Two people had made important decisions and he was going to give them one last chance to change their minds. He walked onto the balcony where they were waiting for him.

If not for the kilometre-high view, it would have looked like the porch of a log cabin. An invisible mist screen reduced the blasting icy wind to a warm breeze. Gary seemed at peace, his hands on the railing as he took in the vista. From their height, they could see the distinct boundaries of the once-separate territories. The sudden shifts in ecology and climate were clearly unnatural.

“It looks like one of your board games from up here,” Gary observed. He was the only one who could always sense Jason’s presence, even within Jason’s spirit realm. Jason joined Gary at the rail, looking like a child next to the massive leonid. He didn’t bother to say anything, simply happy to be in his friend’s company. The other person was standing by the wall, still and silent as a block of wood.

“Why did you put the cloud palaces all the way up here?” Gary asked.

“Because we could,” Jason said. “It’s an adventure, remember? There have to be joys and wonders to go with all the sacrifice and loss.”

Gary smiled.

“Fair enough,” he said. “You know, Rufus is going to be a problem for a while.”

“Farrah has an idea about that.”

“You talked with her?”

Jason shook his head.

“She’s discussing it with some of the others now. I’m listening in.”

Jason waved his hand at the air around them.

“Now that I control all of it,” he said. “I can eavesdrop where and when I like.”

“What’s Farrah’s idea?”

“I’ll let her explain it. I don’t know if Rufus will go for it, or how well it’ll work if he does.”

“You should ask his mother.”

“I know. I’m sorry I won’t be around to help with him. I’ll be gone before you.”

“We do what we can and accept what we can’t,” Gary said.

“If either of us was willing to accept that,” Jason said, “neither of us would be here.”

“And we’ve both paid the price,” Gary pointed out.

Jason shook his head.

“No, you’ve paid the price. I always seem to come back stronger, but you’ve given up everything. It doesn’t feel right.”

“Don’t,” Gary said. “I get enough of that from Rufus.”

“Sorry. This is your last chance to change your mind, though. If you want to stick around. I know you won’t, but I still have to ask.”

“What do you think I should do?”

“Whatever feels right.”

Gary nodded.

“I thought you might say that. I was half-hoping you had a compelling reason for me to stay, but I know what’s right for me. It’s just easy to doubt, you know? Especially with Rufus telling me to cling onto life. Even if it’s a ragged, broken scrap of one.”

“It might not be that bad, and none of us want to lose you, Gary. But there’s courage in letting go when holding on isn’t right. Shade refuses to tell me what comes next, but he does think you’re making the right choice.”

“I am still not going to tell you why,” Shade’s voice came from Jason’s shadow.

“Not even a hint?” Jason wheedled. “You know his situation.”

Gary's chuckle came out as a deep, resonating growl.

"Leave him alone, Jason."

"I am not privy to what will happen to Mr Xandier," Shade said. "All I know are the possibilities — which I will not be sharing."

"Don't you let him push you around, Shade," Gary said.

"Of course, Mr Xandier. I wish you good fortune on the next step of your journey... Gareth."

"Thank you," Gary said. He pushed himself off the railing and looked over at the other person on the balcony. It was the tree's avatar, the wooden replica of Jason.

"At least I can do one last good deed, even if it is only stepping aside to make survival easier for someone else," Gary said. "I'll see you on the other side."

Gary left as Jason nodded, his eyes on his wooden doppelganger.

"You get the same chance," Jason told it. "Last opportunity to change your mind."

"Do you not still wish me to take root in your soul realm?"

"It's a risk for both of us," Jason said. "If we do this, we're saddled together for all eternity. I can't tell you how that will go, but I can tell you there's more risk to you than to me. At the end of the day, if we do this and we don't end up getting along, it's my soul realm. If push came to shove, I could probably strip the mind out of you and turn you into just another power for me to use. You're trusting me with your very existence with little time and less information to base that decision on. It's a terrible choice to have to make when you'll be living with the consequences forever."

"We have been over this," the replica said. "My mind is unchanged."

"Okay," Jason said. "I had to offer. All that's left is to get it done."

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Jason stood alone on a wooden balcony. He let the invisible mist screen dissipate, allowing the chilling, high-altitude winds to wash over him. This wasn't his first time resolving a transformation zone, but this time the training wheels were off. No instinctive, good-enough-will-do solutions would do; too many details mattered for him to be anything but exact. He couldn't afford close-enough when it came to the soul forge, the natural array, the tree or the new home for the brighthearts.

There was also the mass of undeath energy to deal with. Two hundred thousand dead brighthearts left to fester had created an energy that had permeated the old brightheart city. That power had been brought with them into the transformation zone, and while they dealt with the priests and the avatar, that power remained. If Jason didn't handle it properly, it could infest everything again, making the new would-be home of the

brighthearts uninhabitable. If he let it infest the tree, he could create an adversary worse than the one they'd already fought.

For all these reasons, he couldn't just let instinct guide him. He needed to dig in and manage the details himself. Every mistake he made could lead to dire consequences.

"Well," he muttered to himself, "standing around brooding won't make it go faster."

"Oh, thank goodness."

"What was that, Shade?"

"Pardon, Mr Asano?" Shade's voice came from Jason's shadow.

"You just said something?"

"No," Mr Asano.

"You definitely said something."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Mr Asano. It makes sense that you are distracted, however; there is a lot on your mind."

"Uh-huh."

Jason shook his head and chuckled. He took one last look at the panorama of the transformation zone and then, with a startling simple act of will, destroyed it. The landscape smeared like wet paint splashed with water. Reality beyond the reach of the tree twisted and warped until it was nothing but a blur of colour. The colour slowly faded as it swirled around until all that was left was black, deeper than any night sky.

What Jason perceived through the blackness was not something he would later be able to explain. It was not the stuff of the material world but the space between potential and result; between what could be and what would be.

He was reminded of his time on Earth using the Builder's door, roaming in the space underneath reality. He'd been repairing the link between worlds and only now realised how crude and fumbling he had been. He'd gotten the job done, but he'd been trying to etch microchips with oven gloves, a blindfold and an axe. The result was just ugly, even if he did get the link more or less repaired.

Things were different now. Now he had the tools and experience to shape reality without making a complete ham of things. A large part was simply accepting that it was his work to do. This was the work of higher beings, and he had come to terms with the fact that he was on the path to standing amongst them. He was by no means an expert, but he wasn't the bumbling mortal he had been, either.

Jason's first task was breaking down the transformation zone into a state he could work with. He was already working on that, with the zone at large no longer inhabitable. Only the safe zone of the tree and the buildings upon it remained intact. Even that space

would get some changes, but it would remain a survivable area throughout the process. He could feel the occupants watching the zone break down from balconies and windows, although they would eventually be rendered unconscious.

In Jason's previous transformation zones, the safe spaces had been pagodas that became the heart of his spiritual domains. This time, Jason had decided to use the tree rather than create a new safe zone or use his head-shaped mountain. The tree was a sentient thing, and while he was going to change it, he didn't want to break it down and remake it from nothing, like the rest of the zone. He simply wanted to extract the natural array and the soul forge that were corrupting it.

Reshaping the zone required a precision and ability to multitask that was outside the scope of the mortal mind. Jason would not be able to carry out his task as he was. As he had when fighting the avatar, Jason had to become something else. The last time was dangerous, but he had learned much. He was confident he could come back to himself when the task was done.

He put his thoughts aside — not just his personal musings but everything. Mortal thinking would distract him from a task that required higher-order cognition. He let himself float off the balcony and join with the unformed space beyond. Once, this would have killed him. Now, it was what he needed to reshape himself, that he could reshape the zone in turn.

## Chapter 850

### Heroes Cheat All the Time

A massive shaft led from the surface of Pallimustus to what had once been the home of the brighthearts. The Adventure Society expedition had fought their way down through elemental messengers and monsters adapted to the extreme depths. Months after the transformation zone had been put in place, the dangers of the shaft had been tamed, for a certain definition of tame. The messengers were gone and most of the monsters had learned to avoid the place. Those that remained, though, were not something a lone silver-rank wanted to run into.

The elemental forces that had made the lower portions of the descent difficult were no longer a factor. With the natural array subsumed into the transformation zone, the ambient magic had returned to normal. The lessening of interference with personal and commercial flight devices granted access to people and infrastructure that previously wouldn't have survived the journey down the shaft. Even so, anyone short of a silver-ranker would find the environment hostile. Such subterranean depths were not hospitable to humans and their ilk.

Despite a few lingering threats, an outpost had been established at the bottom of the shaft where the impenetrable transformation zone cut it off. It had been carved from the walls of the shaft, with rooms and tunnels dug deep into the stone. It was almost a town, complete with ambitious merchants, shopkeepers and taverns. The deeper sections were where the less influential were relegated; Magic Society researchers and merchant delegations that inevitably cropped up when high-rankers gathered. The glass-fronted chambers abutting the shaft were the domains of the powerful.

The shaft-side chambers of the outpost all had huge windows of magically reinforced glass. From within, the most powerful of the outpost's occupants waited for the rainbow barrier of the transformation zone to drop. These were the people with real power, including gold and even a few diamond-rankers.

One of these rooms was a multi-storey tavern. Its exterior wall, spanning three levels, was a single pane of glass, the largest window in the outpost. It was spacious in a place where space was precious, and well-decorated for a chamber carved out of the rock. Every booth and table had a privacy screen, and the wood panelling could have been pried up and traded for a moderately-sized airship. The window was further enchanted to keep out the rainbow light from the transformation zone below. Many observation rooms did not have this feature and were constantly painted in bright, shifting hues.

It was one of the most exclusive venues in Pallimustus, by location, patronage and cost. Not just any silver-ranker could spend time there; they needed the backing and reputation for at least some of the gold-rank patrons to recognise and accept them. They also needed to afford the food and drink on offer. The silver and gold-rank libations being served had been brought down at exorbitant cost and cheapskate lingerers were not tolerated.

The clientele was impressive, and Jason would have recognised quite a few faces. The Sapphire Crown guild of Rimaros had been present since the early days of the outpost. Although Zara was only a former princess and had left the royal family for political reasons, the Storm King did not stop caring for his daughter. The royal guild had a full contingent in place, led by Trenchant Moore.

Danielle Geller had gotten used to being one of the most powerful people in any given room, but that was very much not the case in this room. Some of the auras she couldn't sense would belong to stealth specialists, but she had no doubt there were a few diamond-rankers on hand as well.

Danielle had sought out Allayeth on arriving in Yaresh, having heard she was close to Humphrey and his team. The diamond-ranker had expressed a desire to wait at the outpost, but she was far too busy. Not only was Yaresh still in dire need of rebuilding, but the messengers had renewed attacks after the transformation zone had appeared. None of them would even have known what a transformation zone was if not for the Church of Knowledge.

There was one pair that Danielle was most wary of. She had seen them rebuff the social approach of another diamond-ranker, letting a brief glimpse of their auras show. These two were beyond the likes of Soramir Rimaros or Roland Remore. Danielle's money was on them being from beyond Pallimustus, contemporaries of Dawn. Her companion disagreed, betting them to be ancient diamond-rankers, perhaps unseen for millennia.

That same companion now entered the privacy screen around Danielle's table. A priest of Hero, he had skin of dark chocolate and a thornbush of curly hair. He set a fresh drink in front of Danielle and another in front of himself before sprawling into a chair. After patting his pockets for a moment, he fished out a pack of cards and waved them questioningly. Danielle nodded and he started dealing.

"How are they?" Danielle asked.

"Well, they're bronze-rankers being kept in an underground chamber so far below the ground they need the room enchanted just so they can breathe. They've been dragged



across the world to wait for a son who will probably die right in front of them, so... not well.”

Danielle looked out at the transformation zone barrier and frowned.

“This needs to end.”

“It’s not like you to be impatient.”

“I knew strange days were coming,” she said. “The movements of the church of Knowledge. The ever-extending time between monster surges. I raised my children to be ready for a world where being just an adventurer wasn’t enough anymore.”

“There you go,” Gwydion said. “You prepared Humphrey for this.”

“For *this*?” she said, gesturing out the window. Rainbow light from the impenetrable barrier painted the walls of the shaft. Treatment on the observation window kept it out of the tavern.

“You think I’m not worried?” Gwydion asked. “My whole family is down there. Little Roo is going to be a mess over Gary. I’m just glad Mum is in there with him. Dad will probably be less help.”

Danielle snorted a laugh. She looked at her cards and dismissively tossed them onto the table.

“A priest of Hero shouldn’t cheat.”

“Heroes cheat all the time. Tales are full of such deeds.”

Danielle acknowledged the point with a nod as Gwydion dealt a fresh hand.

“I worry I made a mistake in pushing Humphrey and Jason together. I knew he would be caught up in things — that’s the nature of outworlders — but I didn’t expect...”

Her gaze wandered over who she believed to be the most powerful pair in the room.

“...attention of quite this level.”

“I’m looking forward to meeting this Asano,” Gwydion said. “I’m not sure anything could live up to the rumours, now. My brother is very taken with him, according to Mum. They aren’t...?”

“No,” Danielle said. “Not as far as I know. My sources tell me that Jason’s tastes drift towards women. Of the extremely powerful variety.”

“Your sources being your son diligently calling his mother?”

“I would never use my son as a source.”

“There are at least some lines you won’t cross, then?”

“What? No, he’d just be a terrible source of information. Far too biased for me to take his word uncritically.”

Gwydion chuckled and laid down his cards with a smirk that vanished when Danielle did the same. He stared at her cards disbelievingly.

“How did...?”

“Heroes cheat all the time,” she told him. “I’m reliably informed that tales are full of such deeds.”

He grumbled as he swept up the cards, only to stop and look at the window. Danielle did the same, both sensing the change before rainbow light flared up the shaft. It pushed past the magical treatment on the window to wash through the tavern before rapidly fading.

Danielle and Gwydion got to their feet and were not alone in doing so. Silver, gold and even diamond rankers moved to crowd the window. Only one pair remained where they were, images blurred under their privacy screen. Danielle noted the two most dangerous people in the room not moving but then turned her attention to the window with everyone else. She watched the rainbow light recede down the shaft that was no longer blocked by the transformation zone barrier.

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Jason woke up, face down, on a coarse wooden floor. His head was pounding and he could feel a sharp tug at his soul. He rolled into a sitting position and opened his eyes, but it was his supernatural senses that told him what he needed to know.

He was in his soul realm, in some kind of treehouse. Outside was not one mountain-sized tree but a sweeping forest, the trees sized like ancient redwoods. The treehouse felt like wood, but Jason knew it to be cloud-stuff mimicking it. He could sense the building and others like it spreading through the forest, reaching metropolitan proportions.

He reached out for the soul of the tree, permeating the entire forest. The response he got was a wave of confusion and grogginess that dwarfed his own but, also like him, felt healthy and intact. Jason detected no trace of the natural array, which had been pushed out of the soul realm entirely. The soul forge was elsewhere within Jason’s realm and he would go see it soon. For now, it was enough to know that the tree — or forest, as it now was — was free of the influences that had corrupted it.

Jason tried to dig out his memory of reshaping the transformation zone, but it was little more than a blur. He had entered a very different state to make that possible, and the memories of that time were incompatible with his mind as it was now. He managed to tease out enough to be confident that everything had gone well and get a basic sense of what had happened.

Despite his fears, extracting the soul forge and the natural array from the tree had proven quite straightforward. Once their states were in flux, it was easy to guide them each to their true natures, which included being separate from one another. This allowed him to put each in its proper place and integrate the soul of the tree into his own soul realm.

Incorporating another soul into his own was, unsurprisingly, the trickiest and most intricate part of the entire process. It involved tapping into his new soul forge, healing the tree after it was separated from the forge and the natural array. After finding a state where the tree could exist free of their influence, Jason had to connect it to himself in a way that left them linked but still autonomous.

How well Jason had done with this was still an open question. He imagined that time would reveal all, and there was nothing he could do in the meantime. As they were both rapidly recovering, things seemed to have gone well. There were already some interesting results that would have a major impact on his plans for the very near future.

With the tree successfully integrated, Jason had moved on to separating the rest of his soul from the transformation zone. There was no way to completely separate them and Jason would forever be connected, but he had successfully reforged the physical reality. His goal hadn't been to get everything perfectly right. The objective had been to avoid any critical mistakes in the details that truly mattered. Extracting the undeath energy, separating the soul forge and natural array from the tree. Building a viable home for the brighthearts. Those seemed to have gone well, so anything else he could live with.

The final touch was to repatriate the people in his soul realm and the transformation zone into normal reality. Some he retained in his soul realm while the rest were placed outside, into his new spirit domain. He hoped he had made a new home for the brighthearts that they would find acceptable. Jason's power infused throughout it was something they would have to live with unless they abandoned the area entirely.

Jason's friends and companions he retained in his soul realm and he could feel them scattered through the forest city. They were rousing just as he had, moments earlier. There were others in his soul realm as well; Sophie's mother and the growing collection of messengers.

The Builder cultists and remaining adventurers he placed in his spirit domain. This included not just the brightheart warriors who had fought alongside them but all the brightheart survivors. This area was outside of the transformation zone and outside of Jason's soul realm. It might have been infused with Jason's power, but they were back in their normal universe.

The bulk of the brightheart people had been carried inside Jason's soul throughout his time in the transformation zone. He hoped that the events his soul had gone through, including the battle with Undeath's avatar, hadn't traumatised them too much.

Jason finished casting his senses over his soul realm and pulled up the system window that had been blinking at the edge of his perception.

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- You have established a new spirit domain.
  - Exigent circumstances have allowed you to establish an additional domain despite existing domains exceeding the normal maximum territory.
  - Due to low rank, links between spirit domains separated by dimensional boundaries are impeded.
  
  - Your current spirit domain exceeds your maximum total domain size available by 1,743,621%. Increase your rank to increase available domain size.
  - You have integrated another soul into your soul realm. Some effects that impact your soul realm will not affect the territory of the second soul.
  - The avatar of this soul realm is now connected to you as a nascent Voice of the Will.
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Jason nodded to himself as he closed the window. Everything seemed to have gone as well as he could have hoped, although how the soul inside his own would go was an open question. His memory might have been patchy on the exact process of how it all took place, but he doubted he was forgetting anything important.

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Yumi Asano snapped out orders, trying to stave off panic. The naked apparitions of her grandson wandering around like an oblivious tourist were gone, but now the central administrative buildings of the two domains had turned into trees. That had not been great for maintaining public order, especially after things had finally calmed down after the undead incident.

She resolved that Jason, once he finally made his way back, he was getting a very stern talking to.

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The brightheart leader, Lorenn, wasn't sure when she lost consciousness. She'd been waiting in the cloud palace, attached to the abominable tree, for the transformation zone to be changed. She'd been dwelling on the hope of a new future for her people, and the dread of that hope being snatched away. Even now, with the danger ostensibly over, she didn't trust good fortune. It had been too long, and her people had lost too much.

She came to on a bed of moss. Pushing through a sopor that threatened to drag her back into slumber, she got to her feet and took in her surroundings. She was in what looked like a growth chamber from the old brightheart city. Only one had survived to be consumed by the transformation zone and this wasn't it.

It seemed like she was in a jungle of lush growth crowding in on her. The plants were a vibrant green, heavy with bright flowers and colourful fruit. Light filtered through from above, illuminating the space more than it should have, given the dense canopy. The air was thick, humid and heavy, with just enough breeze to brush against her skin and softly rustle the leaves. She could hear insects, birds, and small animals scurrying through the underbrush.

Overhead, she realised the canopy was partly artificial, with vines and plants dangling from stone walkways. She shook off the fog still clouding her mind and extended her magical senses.

She was in an underground chamber, hundreds of metres across and something like a kilometre high. It superficially resembled the growth chambers of the old brightheart city, but with some obvious differences. It was as if someone had tried to recreate one without brightheart sensibilities to draw on, which is exactly what had happened. It worked, but there was an unfamiliarity to it; an uncanny alienness.

"Asano," she whispered to herself.

He'd done it. Maybe. At least in part, he'd recreated their home. He hadn't gotten it right, because how could he? It wasn't his home and he wasn't one of them. But he'd promised to try and an excited part of Lorenn was ready to find out to what degree he'd succeeded.

She extended her senses again, pushing them harder. The aura of the chamber was vibrant with life, and she could feel the natural array. It was tamped down at the floor level, where she was, but felt much stronger up above. She suspected it was the source of the light that allowed her to see.

Lorenn grinned as she explored the natural array with her senses. This was not the warped and twisted thing that it had become, leading to the downfall of her city and her people. This was the power she had grown up with, warm and comforting.

The only part she found discomforting was a hidden undercurrent in the aura. She had to push hard to sense it, but once she latched onto it, she realised it was everywhere. Everything else existed within it, like islands in the sea. It was the aura of Jason Asano.

She put that revelation aside for the moment, choosing to focus on the most important thing. In pushing her senses through the chamber she had sensed some of her

people scattered around it. There were perhaps a few hundred, their auras filled with tiredness and confusion. Looking around for a path through the thick foliage, Lorenn spotted some stone stairs hidden behind ferns and under moss. She set out to collect her people together.

## Chapter 851

### You Know It's Trouble

Two tunnels linked the realm of the brighthearts with the surface of Pallimustus. Both had been cut off by the transformation zone, and both were now open again. One tunnel had been dug by the messengers for their first attempt to turn the natural array into a soul forge, triggering the subsequent disasters.

The messengers had been monitoring the tunnel, no longer impacted by the power of the natural array that had corrupted them into mindless berserkers. When the transformation zone vanished they had poured down in search of answers, only to swiftly retreat.

What they found was a glassy smooth shaft of black crystal, shaped into a perfect cylinder hundreds of metres across. Blue and orange eyes had lit up the moment they entered, firing beams of blue disruptive force and orange resonating force. Worse were the afflictions that started infesting their body, turning pristine feathers and flesh into black rot. Added to the elemental forces of the natural array, easily felt in the shaft, and it was clear no messengers would find safe passage.

The second tunnel had a town where it met the surface, rapidly constructed through collaboration between the Adventure Society and Magic Society. At the bottom of the hole was an outpost occupied by a gathering of powerful adventurers and other interested parties. Various governments from the surface were represented, as were numerous organisations and associations, including many churches. There were also agents from opportunistic merchant cartels, curious noble houses and other parties of varying legitimacy.

When the rainbow barrier of the transformation zone vanished, it was not long before people were pouring down a shaft identical to the one savaging messengers at that very moment. Priests, adventurers and magical researchers moved alongside the agents of noble houses, criminal enterprises and merchants hoping to turn boldness into spirit coins.

There was a clear hierarchy in the descent through the shaft, aligning exactly along the lines of power. At the front were Raythe and Velius, the peak diamond-rankers from beyond Pallimustus. Then came the handful of other diamond-rankers, including Allayeth. She had not been waiting at the outpost, but word travelled fast and diamond-rankers travelled faster.

The gold-rankers came next, but that was where the jostling for primacy began. It was rare to see so many gold-rankers outside of a monster surge, and rarer to have them

moving as one. Priests and officials of powerful and legitimate forces jockeyed for position. Gwydion Remore took his cue from Danielle Geller and let others go ahead, hanging back ahead of the silver-rankers.

The shaft was not as hostile to the group as the other was to the messengers, but it was far from welcoming. Blue and orange nebulous eyes appeared on the walls like liquid behind glass. They followed the group as it descended through the shaft, imposing a growing sense of trespass on the people moving down.

That sense affected some more than others. Gwydion felt nothing at all while Danielle felt an aura that was familiar, but profoundly changed from the last time she had felt it. Most of the others showed different levels of unease, from discomfort to fear. Those driven by avarice, opportunism and malice felt as if the eyes of a god were watching them. Raythe and Velius showed no reaction to whatever they were feeling beyond sharing a quick glance.

For some, the sense of unease and trespass grew stronger. Many amongst the silver-rankers turned back, shooting up the tunnel with a sense of having escaped some unseen danger. For those that persisted, the eyes on the walls grew more numerous and started tracking individuals.

When afflictions began affecting some of the people, most of them retreated up the shaft. Only a few of the silver-rankers attempted to tough it out, some trying healing or protection magic. It didn't take long for them to realise the futility and flee upwards as well. The eyes tracking them followed them up, pursuing them back to the outpost.

The impacted gold-rankers lasted longer, their protection and cleansing magic more effective. As the group continued downwards, however, it became clear they would not last. They shot back up the shaft, some growled threats at the air before departing.

Around a third of the initial group were forced into retreat, many already planning return attempts. Of those that remained, many were left unsettled by the aura but were, thus far, unharmed. They finally reached the bottom of the shaft.

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The new forest city at the centre of Jason's soul realm had a soul of its own. Like Nik, Jason had unconsciously brought it into being with the transformation zone's inception. Unlike Nik, the results were not neat and clean. Nik had been spun from wholecloth, fresh and new as the Healer's gift erased any flaws.

The forest had not been a forest at first, but a single, mountainous tree. A living edifice, mad and hostile. Unlike Nik, it had predated the transformation zone as a corrupted and half-formed thing. The messengers had tried to produce a soul forge from



the natural array and gotten it terribly wrong. The array had created an incomplete soul forge that, in turn, created an incomplete messenger birthing tree. The result was a warped whole in three parts, each reliant on — yet poisonous to — the others.

That mess has gone into the transformation zone, becoming the building blocks for the twisted antagonist at the centre of the zone. The tree, a living product of two unliving things, had developed a soul. Unlike Nik, the results were not divinely-guided perfection. This was a second product, victimised by its corrupt origin and Jason's unknowing influence.

Jason's most laborious task in reintegrating the transformation zone had been untangling the mess that was the tree, the natural array and the soul forge. So far as he could tell, he had managed to bring each to a completed state, allowing them to exist separately and be extracted from one another. They had each become complete without the others and the tree changed most of all, from a single monstrous plant to a living forest city.

The array went back to the brightheart realm; where it came from in the first place and where it belonged. It was part of Jason's spirit domain, but also firmly rooted in a normal universe. The soul forge and the tree were both in Jason's soul realm, which was a reality in and of itself, but a much less stable one.

The results of Jason claiming the soul forge were simple and predictable enough. His soul realm was in the process of breaking down, the astral throne, astral gate and soul forge setting him on the path to becoming an astral king. As for the tree merging with his soul realm, the ramifications would take time to be fully revealed.

The tree's form was the most obvious difference. Instead of a single, mountainous tree, it was a forest spanning from horizon to horizon. Spiritually, the change was far less, with the tree's soul retaining its integrity. While the rest of Jason's soul realm was slowly breaking down, the forest city remained fully intact.

Jason was holding off the process of becoming an astral king, staving off the breakdown of his soul realm outside of the forest city. He needed to make preparations and wanted to say his farewells. He didn't how long it would be before he saw his friends again, and there was one he never would.

Only one portion of the wider soul realm was not in the process of slowly collapsing. High above the forest city was a mountain resting on an island of clouds. At an altitude too high to be seen from the ground, the exterior was frozen and wind-blasted with air too thin in oxygen to breathe. The mountain had been carved into the shape of Jason's head.

Inside, the mountain had been dug out into a complex of giant hallways and cavernous rooms. The construction was dark stone, carved from the mountain, and crude industrial metal. The air was hot, wet and heavy. The lighting came from thick glass pipes that moved in and out of the walls and ceilings or were set into the floor. Glowing magma pumped through the pipes, painting everything in shifting, ominous red.

The magma came from the central feature of the mountain interior: a massive shaft running from above the highest level to under the lowest. A waterfall of magma spilled down through the shaft, not touching the walls. The walls were covered in a mix of small waterfalls that quickly turned to steam, windows into the surrounding rooms and tropical plants growing right out of the stone.

Jason arrived at the lowest level of the complex. It was akin to a grotto or a cenote, but with magma pooling below instead of water. A metal catwalk was bolted to the coarse stone walls, and five heavy iron doors were spaced evenly around the walls. One held an elevating platform that led up to Jason's office. Three of the others led to the astral throne, astral gate and soul forge.

The last, even Jason was unsure where it led. What he did know was that it was the reason the mountain wasn't breaking down like the rest of his soul realm. He also suspected who was responsible for it. He made a casual gesture and the metal door slid slowly aside with a loud, mechanical grinding.

Behind the door was a vast and starry void. Off in the distance, he could see nebulae of blazing colour. The closest was the familiar eye-shape of blue and orange, matching both Jason's eyes and his most alien familiar. Those more distant were of other shapes and colours, only one of which he recognised. He spotted the mountain-shaped nebula belonging to Carmen, an avatar of doom like Gordon.

"This is you, isn't it?" he asked.

Gordon manifested next to him, the orbs around him glowing blue in confirmation.

"Is this the next bit of trouble coming our way?" Jason asked.

Half of the orbs turned orange.

"You don't know if it's trouble?"

The orbs all turned orange.

"Oh," Jason said. "You know it's trouble; you just don't know if it's next."

The orbs turned blue.

"That's what I thought."

Jason tilted his head, as if listening to something, and sighed.

"Just what I did not need: house guests."

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The large group reached the bottom of the shaft in darkness. The glowing eyes on the walls were no longer present, having chased the now-departed members of the group back up the shaft. Danielle guessed that it was feelings of hostility or exploitative desires that triggered the defences, and was curious as to how accurate that detection was. If it could accurately sense such feelings in the auras of the diamond-rankers, that was impressive, and likely to make said diamond-rankers angry. Most were centuries past anyone being able to peek at their feelings.

Seeing in the dark was not an issue for this group. They had all known they were heading underground, so those without appropriate powers had picked up magic items instead. Seeing through non-magical darkness was not expensive to overcome by adventurer standards.

The bottom of the shaft was smooth and glossy, like the walls. Being a mother, Danielle smirked as she idly imagined how easily it would pick up grubby little fingerprints. Neither Humphrey nor Henrietta had been shy about playing in the dark, rich dirt of the Greenstone delta.

There were two doors set into the wall, both dark metal and both closed. One was the size of normal double doors while the other was freight-warehouse sized. The larger door slid open, revealing a long hallway, wide and tall. It curved off into the distance, beyond which some light source offered at least a little illumination.

Some of the group started moving forward, but the moment they did, an odd figure manifested in the doorway. It looked like a floating cloak, blacker than midnight, empty save for a single oversized eye in the hood. The eye was blue, orange and nebulous, like those that had chased off some of their group with bleak afflictions.

The figure made no sound, but its presence arrested those who had been moving forward. There was silence as no one knew quite what to do until it was broken by footsteps echoing down the tunnel. The group watched as a single man rounded the curve of the tunnel, making his way towards them in unhurried fashion. Wandering through the tunnel as if strolling through a market, he wore a garish floral shirt, tan shorts and sandals. He had a glass of fruit juice in one hand and was munching on a sandwich held in the other.

## Chapter 852

### Steve, Lord of Undeath

Jason had gone through a change since Danielle had last seen him in Greenstone, yet many of the hallmarks were the same. He was noticeably taller, although still short by adventurer standards. His features had the usual smoothing out that came with rank, although his chin was still prominent under the neatly cropped beard. The wavy hair was still the same, black and glossy to the point of reflecting the dim light shining from the tunnel.

The big difference was in his eyes. They were the same glowing nebulas that had chased part of her group back up the shaft, and the single eye of the guardian creature floating by the door. It left no question as to whom the power guarding this place belonged.

That power tied into the supernatural changes Danielle saw in Jason, far more drastic than the physical ones. His aura was more powerful than anything Danielle had ever sensed in a silver-ranker; probably as strong as her own. More arresting than the raw power of it was the way it blended into the ambient magic of their surroundings.

Admittedly, the whole area was permeated with what she now recognised as Jason's aura, but it was hard to tell where he ended and his surroundings began. Danielle had seen that before, from the Mirror King. Jason's technique was definitely lesser but, to Danielle's knowledge, the Mirror King was the most skilled aura master in the world. Being on the same scale as him would be a triumph for a gold-ranker. Doing so at silver was simply monstrous.

The group watched in silence as Jason made his slow passage down the long hallway. Occasionally someone would stir, as would the guardian creature floating in the doorway. Danielle cast the occasional glance at the diamond-rankers up the front, but they seemed content to wait.

"That's him?" Gwydion asked in a whisper.

"That's him," Danielle confirmed.

"I think he might like to make an entrance more than my dad."

As Jason was about to reach the shaft, Danielle was suddenly aware of a new presence nearby. The entire group felt the sudden rise in power, divine

in strength and heinously corrupt in nature. The group scattered to the walls of the shaft, even the diamond-rankers, leaving the god of Undeath alone.

Danielle looked over the god. He was tall and corpse-pale, with dead eyes and limp, grey hair. There was a faint glow of purple in his milky corpse eyes, only visible in the darkness of the shaft. Jason wandered right up to the god, who was half again Jason's height, and continued eating his sandwich.

"You devoured my avatar," Undeath accused Jason. The god's voice had the grinding quality of stone closing over a tomb. Jason held up one finger in a pausing gesture as he chewed his food.

"Do not try denying it," Undeath warned Jason. "I can feel what you turned my power into."

"You're the one who left it sitting around," Jason said after swallowing. "Things would have been a lot easier if you hadn't chucked a bunch of your power in there with us. A lot was going on in there and having to clean up after you did not simplify things."

"You have made powerful enemies here, Asano," the god said. Just the sound of his voice made Danielle feel like she was being buried alive but Jason showed no sign of being intimidated by the figure looming over him.

"Maybe," Jason suggested, "you and the god of Destruction should take a step back. Reassess things. Take a look at who won and who lost here, and start worrying about the enemy *you've* made."

With one hand occupied by a glass of fruit juice, Jason gripped his half-eaten sandwich in his teeth to free up the other. He wiped his hand on his shirt and plucked a glowing purple marble from his pocket. Danielle felt a hideous power from it, an echo of that coming from the god. Jason tossed the marble up and the god caught it.

"You think tribute will spare you from my ire?" the god asked.

Jason took the sandwich out of his mouth.

"I just didn't want it sitting around," he said. "You know what renovating is like. You find a bunch of nasty stuff laying around and you get a guy in to chuck it all out. So, now that you've collected the garbage, your invitation to this domain is rescinded. Get out of my house, Steve."

The god lingered for a moment, glaring at Jason, then was gone as if he'd never been.

“That guy sucks,” Jason announced to the room and cast his gaze over the people gathered around the edge of the shaft.

“Okay,” he called out. “My friend Shade will start approaching people. If he offers to take you inside, follow him. If he doesn’t, go away. I think you all know what not going away means, but let’s not make things any more unpleasant than necessary.”

Shadows started moving and Danielle realised that Jason’s shadowy familiar had been there the whole time. Far more numerous than before, and now able to hide from her senses, despite her own rank-up since last seeing the familiar. The shadows were barely perceptible in the dim light coming from the tunnel until they started partly glowing white. This made them more visible, as well as reflecting a design she found familiar.

Back in Greenstone, Jason had proven something of a social butterfly, particularly at the symphony. In typical Jason style, he’d foregone local formalwear fashion, although she could not blame him when she’d seen Greenstone fashion for herself. She recalled that he’d had one of the Bertinelli brothers make something based on designs from Jason’s homeworld. Her excellent gold-rank memory threw out the word ‘tuxedo.’

“Did he just call the god of Undeath ‘Steve?’” Gwydion whispered.

“Yes,” Danielle said.

“Why?”

“You’ll come to learn that, with Jason, it pays to let the incongruities pass.”

Danielle was not surprised that the first people Shade approached were the two most powerful diamond-rankers. She was a little surprised that they were old acquaintances.

“Lord Velius; Lady Raythe. If you would follow me, please.”

“Shade,” Velius said. “It’s been some time.”

“Indeed, Lord Velius. I was rather caught up in something your master had taken from the Builder and had been left long-abandoned.”

“I heard you’d been betrayed by your summoner. An unbecoming affair. You know it was Umber who—”

“I am quite aware, Lord Velius. Perhaps we shall talk as I show you around Mr Asano’s newest spirit domain. Lady Raythe?”

“Thank you, Shade,” she acknowledged and followed the familiar as he led them towards the tunnel.

Other Shade bodies approached others and likewise led them in that direction. After the god of Undeath left when told, no one else was stupid enough to think they knew better. Those that remained were mostly Adventure Society and Magic Society representatives, along with adventurers connected to those who went on the expedition with Jason.

Jason himself shadow jumped in the gloom, appearing in front of Danielle and Gwydion. He ignored the people watching them as he flashed Danielle a smile before turning to Gwydion.

“We haven’t met, but you remind me of someone,” Jason said.

“That was the god of Undeath, right?” Gwydion asked.

“Yep,” Jason confirmed.

“Why did you call him ‘Steve?’”

“I was concerned he would turn himself into a sexy version of himself called Stefan.”

“Funny you should say that. I was spying on some Undeath priests once when their god appeared before them,” Gwydion said. “He was a lot less growly and corpsy with his own people. Had kind of a handsome dad feel to him.”

“The god didn’t notice you spying?” Jason asked.

“Oh, he noticed,” Gwydion said with a laugh. “I was chased very far.”

Jason laughed with him as Danielle shook her head.

“You remind me of someone,” Jason said to Gwydion. “You’re more relaxed than the person I’m thinking of, but you have the same obnoxious level of handsomeness. Where did you get your training?”

“My family runs a school,” Gwydion said, his expression turning confused at Jason’s triumphant grin.

Jason shoved his drink and sandwich into his storage space and replaced them with a filled shot glass in each hand instead. He held one out for Danielle and kept the other for himself, looking at her expectantly. She held it in her fingers, rolling her eyes after reading the words printed on it. She gave Jason a look dripping with reluctant motherly indulgence, but still joined

him as they drained their glasses in a gulp. Her face immediately took on a pinched expression.

“Oh, that is sickly sweet,” she complained. “I see there are ways you still haven’t changed, Jason.”

“Can someone please explain what’s going on?” Gwydion asked.

Danielle held out her now-empty glass so he could see the words ‘my family runs a school’ printed on the side.

“That,” Gwydion said, “leaves me with more questions, not fewer.”

“Allow me to introduce Jason Asano,” was Danielle’s only explanation. “Jason, you’ve clearly noted the family resemblance, but allow me to introduce Gwydion Remore.”

Jason chuckled as he took the empty glass from Danielle and stowed it with his own, back into his inventory. Now with his hands free, he held out one for Gwydion to shake.

“G’day mate.”

“A delight to meet you,” Gwydion said. “I must say, I wasn’t sure what to expect after all the rumours, but-”

“Excuse me,” a man cut into their conversation. He was gold-rank, but plainly through monster core use from his aura. Danielle and Gwydion shared a look of surprise while Jason just looked annoyed. Seemingly oblivious to their reaction, the man continued.

“You’re obviously ignorant of my identity as your servant has approached several people before me, but I can assure you that-”

He made a gurgled sound as his aura was crushed, not by Jason but by the ambient magic as it became significantly less placid. The man then shot up the shaft as if fired from a cannon.

“I think it’s me,” Jason said. “I think I attract them. Did that guy not see me tell the god of Undeath to sod off? And have him actually do it?”

He shook his head, the good mood gone from his expression. He gestured absently and a soul realm portal arch rose from the floor.

“I’m on a bit of a clock and have to go see some people out here, but I’ll send you into my soul realm to see your families.”

Danielle and Gwydion looked over the portal.



“This isn’t a normal portal,” observed Danielle, whose dimension essence left her extremely familiar with dimensional forces. “Where does it go?”

“My soul.”

Her eyebrows raised in surprise.

“Really?”

“It’s a bit more complicated than that. I do have to go, though.”

She shrugged and stepped through. Gwydion only hesitated a moment before following. The portal closed and a normal shadow portal appeared in its place. Jason stepped through, leaving people either standing around or being led through the large door by Shade. One of the men standing around looked at his friend.

“Reks, I don’t think we’re getting in.”

“No kidding.”

“Do you think the god of undeath’s name is really Steve?”

“No, Daniel. The god of undeath’s name is Undeath.”

“What if that’s more like a title?”

“You think his name is secretly Steve, Lord of Undeath?”

“It would explain why he just uses the title. You think that’s worse than Undeath, the god of undeath?”

“I’ll concede that’s not great, but yes, I do think it’s worse. You’re positing that all of the gods secretly have different names but are embarrassed about them?”

“I always imagined the goddess of wind as a Susan.”

“Susan?”

“It’s got that wooshing sound. SOO-san. Like the wind.”

“This conversation is going to get us both killed. Probably by the god of idiocy.”

“What do you think of Steve as a name for the god of idiocy?”

“I thought the idea was that Undeath’s real name was Steve.”

“There can be more than one Steve.”

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Lorenn had been roaming through the new brightheart home, gathering her people together. It consisted of three main areas, one being the growth

chambers in which she had awoken. A network of interconnected chambers, they were part hanging gardens, part water source and part orchard. The edible vegetables, fruit and fungus they produced would exceed the needs of the diminished brightheart population.

There were animals, mostly birds and insects, as there had been before. She was pleasantly surprised they had made the transition from city to transformation zone and back. The growth chambers, especially these new ones, would have felt alien without their presence.

The second part of their new home was made up of chambers taking full advantage of the natural array. Where the growth chambers used the array for light and temperature regulation, these functional chambers employed it for more practical purposes. This included forges, hot springs, ceramic workshops and even quarries where high-quality stone was not just available but grew back like plants.

The final and most central part of the new subterranean realm was the main city. Lorenn had finally wandered into it while exploring their new realm, finding it the only place not teeming with life. It was made up of mostly stone in many varieties, from granite and sandstone to marble and quartz. The other main material was metal, also in various iterations.

There were some signs of life she found as she walked through the empty streets. She wasn't entirely alone, with scattered members of her people also exploring the space. Some were gathering into groups while others remained solitary. Lorenn greeted everyone she met, sometimes moving with people until they formed groups of their own, but mostly moved alone.

She wandered through parks with ponds and plant life far more spread out than in the growth chambers. Little animals rustled through the bushes and skipped over the grass. She encountered an entire canal district where she could see fish swimming through the clear waters.

Unlike the growth chambers, there was no illusion of not being underground. Light came not dappling through jungle canopy but from two orbs of white fire, moving slowly across a ceiling two kilometres up.

The other thing dominating the skyline was a massive spherical building, suspended in the air. A single column held it up from below while a second

affixed it to the ceiling above. The round building was reminiscent of the citadel, one of the most important buildings in the old brightheart city. It was not a recreation, however, the original building being a centuries-old mess. This was clean, new, and organised, with fresh stone and neat design. The exterior was covered with windows, balconies and landing platforms, with what looked like high-capacity air skimmers parked on them.

The city was not what the brightheart home had been, but this was no surprise. Aside from the citadel and one growth chamber, Jason Asano had only seen it in ruins, overrun by undead. It was no surprise that he'd not recreated the brightheart home but his own idea of it. Lorenn was grateful for what he'd done, but this was not the home she'd lost. She hoped that it would become home in time.

Her wanderings brought her to the base of the column leading up to the new citadel. It was made of white marble, streaked with grey. Archways were set into the column at even points, each containing a large elevating platform.

"I know the old citadel was in a separate chamber," Jason said, startling her. She looked to find him standing beside her.

"Thank you," she said. "This is more than we could have asked for."

"But not what you lost," Jason told her. "I can't replace what was taken from you."

"What about all the undeath energy?" she asked. "I know you dealt with the god's avatar, but what about the energy from..."

She paused with a grimace.

"...from the city full of dead people. Before the transformation zone, almost everything was tainted. Many zones stayed that way, even after the priests and their avatar were dealt with."

"I got rid of it," Jason said. "It's not coming back."

"How?"

"I gave it to the god of undeath."

Lorenn took several steps back from Jason, glaring at him with anger.

"You gave that power to him? After what he and his people did to us?"

"That power needed to go. Giving it to him was the only way to excise it cleanly. I could have destroyed it, but that would have left a mark. A taint on this place that is meant to be a new start for your people."

“And a taint on this new territory of yours. Because that’s what this place is, isn’t it? Under everything, it belongs to you.”

“Yes.”

They stared at each other, Jason’s expression neutral. Lorenn’s was a mix of anger, hope and fear.

“I’d like to take you up into the citadel and show you around,” Jason said, “but I lack the time. There are a couple of things we need to talk about, like the people from the surface coming here. I’ve done my best to protect this place but people far stronger than I will take an interest in you now. You will need to decide how your people are going to handle diplomatic relations.”

“I don’t think we’re ready for that.”

“It’s been my experience that the world doesn’t care if you’re ready. There is one thing I should show you though, even if I can’t offer the full tour. We should go directly since I don’t have time to take the elevating platforms.”

He opened up a shadow portal and stepped through.

## Chapter 853

### Time Travel is the Worst

Jason and Lorenn took a shadow portal into a massive domed room. Panes of crystal levitated around in the air, each showing different images of the city outside. In the middle of the room was what looked like a padded marble armchair on a circular platform.

"It'll take some trial and error," Jason said, "but that chair will let you control the city."

"Control how?" Lorenn asked.

"The growth chambers and the more functional ones, those are as they seem. You can make adjustments to the heat, light and water. The main city is not as it seems. While it looks like it is made of stone and metal, with a little ceramic and wood, it is none of those things. The plants, the soil and the water are real, but everything else is a facsimile."

"The city is fake?"

"It's made of clouds, like the buildings you've seen Emir and I make with our flasks. It just looks like stone and steel. And from that chair, you can control it all. You can remake the whole city, flattening and constructing buildings in minutes. It's going to make maintenance very cheap. You can take what I've built here and make it into something entirely different. You can make it into your image of your people's home."

He panned his eyes over the monitors showing various parts of the city.

"The outer chambers will have to stay as they are," he said, "but other than this room, everything else can be changed. By you, or anyone you allow. As it stands, only you can use that chair, but you have the power to give others permission."

"You can't use the chair?"

"I am the chair."

Jason turned from the monitors to give her a sad smile.

"My hope," he said, "is that, over time, you'll evolve the city to accommodate a growing population. I mentioned that people will be coming here. I highly recommend you prioritise meeting with the church of Fertility, but that's for you to figure out."

"I don't have any experience with diplomacy, outside of our bargain with the Builder cult. Where are they, by the way?"

"I've got them contained inside the city."

Jason gestured at one of the screens and it switched from a park to a group of people inside a stone building. She saw no doors or windows, although there was some kind of light source overhead, out of the screen's perspective.

“I have some friends who can perhaps help you with diplomacy. Danielle Geller and Constance Bahadir are the ones you want to talk to, although Danielle is reuniting with her son right this instant.”

Jason opened a portal to his soul realm, from which Emir and Constance emerged.

“Jason?” Emir asked.

“There are people already coming in from the surface,” Jason explained. “Shade can fill you in on the details and I’d like you, Constance, to help guide Lorenn through the diplomatic relations. That’s something I’m famously bad at and I need to go make sure Boris doesn’t convince Clive to attempt time travel.”

“What?” Emir asked, but Jason was already through the portal and gone.

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In the new forest city in Jason’s soul realm, the material from his library had been shifted into a new building, high in the trees. In a room full of tables covered in scrawled notes and open books, one small, round table had a ritual circle floating over it like a hologram. The illusion formed a rough sphere, made up of dense lines and intricate sigils.

The lines of the diagram glowed gold and the sigils blue, washing the room in colour. Boris and Clive stood beside the table, observing the diagram. Clive jabbed a finger at one of the sigils.

“This variable,” he said, frustration painting his voice. “Until I understand what this variable represents, I can’t move forward with dimensional navigation. I know it’s a keystone aspect, but I can’t figure out what it represents. The only clue I have is that Jason doesn’t understand it either, but he was able to feel his way through when travelling between this world and the one he’s from.”

Clive ran a hand through his already dishevelled hair.

“Feel it through,” he repeated. “I understand that he has a sense for dimension forces, but feelings are not an appropriate methodology by which to conduct complex magical workings!”

Boris smiled as he walked around the table, tilting his head as he looked over the intricacies of the diagram.

“Where did you get this model?” Boris asked.

“What?” Clive asked distractedly. “Oh, I threw it together while I was figuring out astral geography. Or trying to, anyway.”

Boris stood up straight from where he’d been leaning over to examine the lower sections of the diagram. He turned to Clive and looked at him from under raised eyebrows.

“You just threw it together?”

“Yeah,” Clive said and turned to look at Boris. “Is there something wrong with it?”

“Weren’t you trained on the astral magic of this world? You know there’s been an active effort to keep the astral magic theory here stunted, right? To keep the link between worlds hidden?”

“I didn’t know that, but it makes sense. Astral magic hadn’t made any real advancements in centuries until around fifteen years ago. Which turned out to be when the Cult of the Builder started actively using it here. That’s when they started getting sloppy.”

“But in that environment, you got to the point of doing this,” Boris said, gesturing at the diagram.

“That’s hardly a feat,” Clive said. “I’ve had access to outside astral magic for years now.”

“How many years?” Boris asked.

“Well, I’ve had access to my mentor’s notes going back almost twenty years. He spent his life piecing together fragments of astral magic from off-world sources, although it was all very patchy. I always wondered how Landemere Vane always seemed to be ahead of me, but it turns out he was a Builder cultist the whole time. Given what he must have had access to, he was actually kind of bad, now that I think about it.”

“How long have you had full access to off-world astral theory?”

“Five years. Plus a few weeks with the library of a diamond-rank messenger. He had some more advanced stuff, but I’ve barely touched that particular trove. It’s hard to get away from saving the day from cataclysmic events when Jason is around.”

“Oh, I know. If he doesn’t fix the link between worlds, I have to.”

“You?”

“I did tell you I knew some astral magic myself.”

“And the World-Phoenix tapped you as Jason’s backup?”

“Nothing so direct,” Boris said. “The World-Phoenix doesn’t just grab someone and tell them to go fix a thing.”

“It told Jason.”

“*Dawn* told Jason. You’ll find that the great astral beings and their prime vessels don’t always see eye to eye. Especially a vessel preparing to hand over the role to someone new. Prime vessels last wildly varying amounts of time in their roles, and I’ve suspected for a while that it’s more than being burned out by raw power. I suspect that the real problem is ideological incongruity developing over time as the vessel develops an independent identity.”

Clive looked thoughtful for a moment as he contemplated the idea.

“You're suggesting that because a vessel needs to fully embody a great astral being, independent thought that diverges from their master's objectives creates a dissonance that results in an escalating incompatibility? Resulting in the need to pass the position on, ideally to someone indoctrinated into service?”

“Exactly,” Boris said. “It's a balance, though. Sometimes you need some independent thinking in the top role. Dawn didn't come into the World-Phoenix's service by being raised in the cult. Same for a lot of the current prime vessels, actually. I suspect they needed people with more flexibility as the fallout of the Sundered Throne gets worse.”

“Sundered Throne?”

“You don't need to worry about that. It's the reason the Builder is running rampant and the World-Phoenix is gambling with worlds instead of forcibly stepping in to save them. Get me drunk some time and I'll tell you all about it.”

“You could tell me now. Wait, no; we're getting distracted. You were saying about the World-Phoenix picking you to fix the link?” Clive said.

“Well, she didn't pick me. She engineered a circumstance where someone with the expertise to fix the link also happened to be invested in seeing it fixed. But if I do it, there'll be problems. It would take an unusual and specific set of circumstances to produce a person who could fix it perfectly. I was always a backup option she set up millennia ago, in case nothing better came along.”

“And then Jason came along.”

“With a few nudges from the World-Phoenix, yeah. She spotted his soul rocketing through the astral along that link and it was right place, right time. She slipped him something that would get him hopping between worlds, and even managed to land him where the closest city had you in it.”

“Me?”

“Someone needed to start teaching him astral magic.”

Boris looked over at the glowing diagram again.

“The fact that someone like you even exists on this planet is bizarre luck,” Boris told Clive. “When I say the World-Phoenix picked Jason at the right place and time, I don't just mean a person flying through the astral at that given moment. I mean him, who he is, how he thinks, that idiot trying to summon a clockwork king in the middle of a magic barren. You, me, the god planning to...”

Boris let out a sigh.

“The World-Phoenix,” he continued, “works with variables more numerous and scattered than you or I could ever comprehend. That's just how great astral beings



perceive the cosmos: ripples of coincidence clashing, over millions, even billions of years. Events so numerous that we don't have names for numbers that high, interplaying in a framework so complex that no mortal mind can fathom it. We can't comprehend it any more than they can understand things on our level. That is why they have vessels and mortal agents. They need people to think like us for them."

"You're saying this is all a game they play, with us the pieces?"

"None of us were chosen, Clive. It goes much deeper than that. Events were set in motion countless times over countless years, with incomprehensible complexity. All to make each of us, or someone close enough to fill a given role, arise when and where we were needed. The World-Phoenix found Jason's soul flying through the astral along the link between worlds. If not him, it would have been someone else. The link has been there a long time and conditions were ripe for outworlders. On the World-Phoenix's time scale, it's barely a wait. Sometimes their machinations work and sometimes they don't, but there are contingencies on contingencies. And sometimes, they'll cut their losses and move on, even if it means letting a world burn. They can live with that. We're talking about vast, alien minds. They don't think or care in the same ways we do."

"Landemere Vane," Clive said.

"Who?" Boris asked.

"The man you mentioned trying to summon a clockwork king. He was the only person I've met with the inclination and intelligence to push the boundaries of astral magic, given the state it was in. And he just happens to also be in some low-magic backwater? You said if it wasn't us, it would be someone like us. Are you suggesting that my hometown exists because some cosmic entity decided millions of years ago that there needs to be someone like me?"

"It's a lot more nuanced, complicated and intricate than that," Boris said. "But broadly, yes."

"Then I have one question," Clive said.

"And what's that?" Boris asked.

Clive stormed over to the diagram and jabbed his finger again at the offending variable.

"WHAT IS THIS?" he yelled. "You clearly understand this magic. You probably understood it before any civilisation I've heard of existed! What is it?"

Boris burst out laughing.

"It's time," he said.

"Time?" Clive said. "That doesn't make sense."

He started pacing as he continued thinking out loud.

“The deep astral doesn't have time or space. Any perception of time or space is a subjective one from those travelling in a pocket of reality like a dimension ship. Unless...”

He turned to look at Boris.

“Each reality, each universe, has its own space and time. They serve as waypoints for astral geography, and travelling between them requires adjustment for relative time. Jason managed to skip out on that because Earth and Pallimustus are linked, synchronising their time-space... something. There really should be a word for it.”

“Continuum,” Jason said, having arrived without either of them noticing. “The word is continuum.”

“I thought you were horribly busy,” Clive said.

“I am, but I had to drop in on this. Boris, are you trying to convince Clive that time travel is possible and that he should do it?”

“It might be possible,” Clive postulated. “I suppose astral travel could be used to transgress relative temporal alignment by hopping between the right universes.”

“I would avoid that,” Boris said. “For several reasons. The first is that it will kill you. To interact with another universe, you have to travel through the astral. That means bringing some reality with you because the astral doesn't have any. Usually, that's a dimension vessel, but gestalt entities, like messengers, are something akin to nascent dimensional vessels.”

He gestured at the space around them, which belonged to Jason's soul realm.

“Some more developed than others,” he continued. “That reality, though, is synchronised with the space-time continuum of whatever actual reality the dimension ship or gestalt being was last in.”

“Okay,” Clive said. “I think I'm starting to get my head around this time variable. Part of astral navigation is synchronising the time of the universe you came from with the time of where you're going. That's why, despite each universe having its own time, they are subjectively passing through time together. If you didn't align the relative time, there would be dissonance.”

“Dissonance?” Jason asked.

“You'd exist in multiple times at once,” Boris said.

“That doesn't sound like something people can do,” Jason said.

“It's not,” Boris confirmed. “You'd stop existing in any time, maybe even stop having ever existed. That's where you start getting into paradoxes and reality ruptures. That's why

the Keeper of Moments doesn't let it get that far. I'm a little surprised the link between Pallimustus and Earth has been left alone this long."

"Because they're synchronised in time," Clive realised. "That's why travelling between them is easier."

"Yes," Boris said. "But that also exposes them to manipulation through that link. If someone had greater than normal access to that link..."

He looked pointedly at Jason.

"...they could, in theory—"

"Attempt time travel," Clive finished. "Jason, you asked if Boris is trying to get me to time travel, but I think he's trying to get you to not."

"He's right," Boris said. "Even making the attempt is highly policed. The Keeper of Moments comes down hard on anyone who comes close to trying it. In terms of bad ideas, even on a cosmic scale, time travel is the worst. Probably. It's a big cosmos, but it's way up there. You do not want to get on the bad side of Raythe, the Keeper's prime vessel. She's so powerful she could trip over and transcend by accident. I don't know of anyone who has held a prime vessel position as long as her. Someone like your friend Dawn is an infant by comparison, although I believe the two are friends. They were friendly last I heard, anyway. Which was around the time people on Earth started experimenting with agriculture, so who knows?"

"Raythe?" Jason asked. "She's here. Shade is showing her around the brightheart city right now."

"She showed herself, then? I wasn't going to say because I don't want to interfere with her business. I did hear she was poking around the link, finally. I doubt that the Builder synchronising the timelines of two universes made the Keeper of Moments very happy. It's a little odd they left things this long. The original Builder made an absolute mess of things when he created these worlds."

"I'm sure I'll find out why she's here soon enough," Jason said. "Speaking with her is on the list, but I've got a handful of hours to deal with it at most. I'm struggling to hold off the process of turning into an astral king, and I have a lot to organise before I do."

Jason gestured at the diagram floating over the table.

"One of those things is setting in motion final repairs to the link. What do you think, Clive?"

"Now that I have a way to quantify that errant variable," Clive said, "I can start looking into how to repair the link properly. You'll have to do the actual repairs, but I can do the research in your absence. Actual research, rather than the slipshod, rush-job nonsense

I've been forced into during this whole blighted sojourn. I'm talking about assistants, laboratories, archives, retesting. Time, gods help me. Actual time to study and test without a civilisation dying if I don't get it right in the next half-hour."

"Time you'll have," Jason said. "And resources. I have no doubt you'll have your own setup on the surface."

"I am so looking forward to seeing sunlight again," Clive said.

"I'll have something for you here in the tree city as well," Jason said. "You can work with one of my avatars and tap into what my soul realm can do. That way I can absorb everything the avatar learns while I'm off making my astral kingdom."

"That won't work," Boris said. "Your soul realm will be in flux during the process of becoming an astral king. You can't leave anyone in here."

"It's fine," Jason said. "I've got a workaround. The trick will be getting the avatars right. They can't replicate me in full, so I have to have specific ones set up. One to work with Clive, another to work with Carlos Quilido, who can finally get back to his big project. I'm setting up a workspace for him, too, so you'll be neighbours, Clive. A space for Sophie's mum, too. Can't have her leaving and turning evil again. Carlos can hopefully help her, in time."

"That's not how it works," Boris said.

"That's why it's called a workaround," Jason said. "Don't worry, I have a plan."

"It had better be an impressive plan," Boris said.

"It is," Jason assured him.

As Jason was giving his confident assurances, Boris' eyes were on Clive who was standing behind Jason, shaking his head.

## Chapter 854

### Unique in the Entire Cosmos

Jason's trinity of astral throne, astral gate and soul forge were now complete. From the moment the soul forge had settled into place, the process of becoming an astral king had begun. The first step, it turned out, was the annihilation of his now-vestigial body. He was holding off the process with willpower, but that would only work for so long. Before his body collapsed entirely, there were arrangements and farewells to be made.

Even though his body worsened with each passing moment, Jason took a much-needed break. The arboreal metropolis of the tree city was enormous and empty, spread across a massive forest and multiple levels, from the ground to the high branches.

The entire place was alive, not just the trees but the buildings and walkways. It was connected to Jason, irrevocably now, but also separate. He hadn't just consumed the tree's young soul but formed a symbiosis with it. The tree's avatar was still present and still a wooden replica of Jason. He could feel it, sitting with the rabbit man, Nik. They had both come into being through Jason's unconscious intervention when the transformation zone formed. The zone was now gone and both had to find their places in a wider world.

Jason lay back in a recliner, attempting to meditate through the growing pain of his body attempting to trigger the astral king transformation. He groaned as Shade emerged from his shadow.

"I do apologise, Mr Asano, but our two most powerful visitors have shown a remarkable level of patience, given who they are. It would be best to attend them sooner rather than later."

"Is that lady really the queen of time?"

"While your description is wholly inaccurate, Mr Asano, I believe the meaning behind it is not. Lady Raythe is, indeed, the prime avatar of the Keeper of Moments. And Lord Velius is the prime vessel of my progenitor."

"And I'm guessing it takes a lot more than a transformation zone and a soon-to-be astral king to get them working together."

"Indeed, Mr Asano. My impression is that they have been waiting for some time. That suggests the import of their purpose is not small, even for such as they."

"Great," Jason lied and rubbed his hands over his weary face. "You know I can feel my body trying to pull itself apart?"

"I can sense it doing so, Mr Asano."

Jason groaned, stood up and opened a portal out of his soul realm. He stepped through to a cloud building within the new home of the brighthearts. It was another balcony, although very different from the one he'd just left. Rather than wood and the smell of earth and pine, it was cloud-stuff masquerading as stone. The two diamond-rankers were sitting in cloud chairs and a third rose from the floor for Jason to fall into.

The prime vessels shared a glance as Jason casually plopped into his chair. He splayed out as if he'd just gotten home after a long day and was lounging about with his friends.

"Oh, I feel like crap," he complained. "Sorry about the lack of amenities. Rewriting reality kind of takes it out of you, and I have a lot to do before I come apart at the seams. No time to shop for home décor."

"We are aware of the constraints on your time," Raythe said. "We share your urgency as we need you to make a decision before you step onto the path that lies before you."

"Meaning you need something before I go full astral king. Well, I don't have time to faff about, so what do you want?"

"What do you know of the Sundered Throne?" Raythe asked.

Jason let out another groan.

"This sounds like faffing about, but you're serious people, so I'll play along for now."

He took a laboured breath as he rubbed his sore head.

"Sundered throne," he muttered. "Some busted cosmic magic thing. I have some connection to it through one of my familiars. Gets used as a prison for people like you two."

"Succinct enough," Velius said. "Once upon a time, the throne wasn't sundered. It was the power that regulated cosmic forces, keeping the great astral beings adherent to their respective purposes. You think of authority as power, but it is not. Transcendent entities have what, on any practical scale, amounts to infinite power."

"To mortals like us," Raythe said, "authority is indistinguishable from power. In truth, it is, as the name suggests, authority. The right for a transcendent being to employ their infinite power in a specific way. Authority is what keeps the cosmos in balance when it is filled with entities of infinite power. The Cosmic Throne was what regulated that balance. The ultimate authority, if you will."

"Let me guess," Jason said. "The great astral beings didn't like being told no by a space chair and busted the thing up."

"A colourful, but not inaccurate guess," Velius said. "But they weren't foolish enough to leave each other completely without boundaries. The great astral beings agreed to a

system of pacts between them. Agreements and concessions that would give them the freedom they were seeking while providing a framework to prevent infinite anarchy.”

Jason erupted into laughter, rocking in his chair.

“A bunch of supreme beings...” he said, forcing out the words between peals of laughter. “...decided that what the fundamental operation of the cosmos needed was...

He continued trying to tamp down his mirth, trying to keep his mouth shut as a fist hammered on the arm of his chair.

“...industry self-regulation,” managed to finish, laughter once again running away with him. Only the encompassing nature of the cloud chair stopping him from falling onto the floor. Velius looked on in disbelief before making a silent appeal to Raythe.

“He’s your friend’s pet,” Velius said.

The moment he said that, the laughter stopped dead. He turned to look at Jason who was now sitting up and staring directly at Raythe.

“So,” Jason said. “You and Dawn are still friends.”

“We are,” Raythe said.

“How is she?”

“Busy doing something not so removed from what you’re about to: Going through the part of transcendence that isn’t just accumulating power.”

“But she’s good?”

“She is,” Raythe said. “She didn’t think you would come across a soul forge so quickly. You’ve pushed the back the timeline she warned you about. The expectation was that you would complete the dimensional bridge first.”

“You know what I’ve got coming? The thing she warned me about, but refuses to explain?”

“I do know it, yes. I’m even going to tell you about it, but not today. You and I will have dealings, but not until you’re an astral king. Right now, there is another affair at hand. But Dawn knew I would be around and asked me to look in on you.”

Jason narrowed his eyes.

“Mah Go Schaat,” he said. “The diamond-rank messenger. You’re what happened to him.”

“Yes. Your death would be inconvenient and having you owe me a favour will be useful to me. In the fullness of time.”

“You aren’t as restricted in how you act here as Dawn was, are you?”

“No,” Raythe said. “The messengers deploying a diamond-ranker against you was all the pretence I needed to intervene. I talked about the pacts between great astral beings.

My great astral being was never party to them. The Keeper of the Sands opposed the sundering from the beginning and refused to participate in any of it. As the Keeper's first representative, I similarly have freedoms that others do not."

"And the other great astral beings let that slide?"

"Those that stood aside were special," Velius said. "They have ever stood apart from the rest, even before the sundering. The Keeper, the All-Devouring Eye, the Word in the Silence."

"If all the cool kids thought it was a bad idea," Jason said, "maybe your boss should have taken that as a sign."

Velius closed his eyes and when they opened, they were black orbs. When he spoke, his voice had turned cold and bleak.

"Our perspective is not that of mortals," the Reaper said. "That is why we have vessels. What might seem obvious to a limited mind is overlooked by one that spans infinity."

"Which is a sanctimonious way of admitting you knobbed-up because your cosmic mind can see infinity while missing the blindingly obvious."

The Reaper stared at Jason through black eyes. Jason stared back, grinning at the great astral being.

"It's nice to meet you, finally. When I'm more than a disembodied soul, anyway. Thanks for being cool about me resurrecting so many times, by the way. More than that, thanks for sending Shade my way. Having him as a friend and companion means more to me than I can say. I know being facetiously insincere is kind of my thing, but I'm genuinely grateful for that."

"Are you willing to repay the kindness?" the Reaper asked.

"If I can. As long as it's nothing too outrageous."

"They want you to repair the Sundered Throne and re-institute regulation on the great astral beings," Raythe said.

Jason turned and gave her a flat look.

"Were you not listening to what I just told that guy?" he asked, pointing at the Reaper. Then he let out a sigh. "I guess that's on me for leaving myself open with a line like that. Should have known better. Fine, I'll fix the cosmos or whatever."

Even the Reaper looked mildly surprised.

"Just like that?" Raythe asked.

"You think I haven't been paying attention?" Jason asked. "I'm willing to bet that all the big-ticket craziness I've been through traces back to you great astral idiots chucking a



tanty and telling your mum that she's not the boss of you. I'm going to go out on a limb and guess that the original Builder playing silly buggers with a couple of worlds was early in the process of realising it was a real bad idea. You sorted him out, but the replacement wasn't much better. Probably got shoehorned into those pacts you mentioned, but he wasn't there from the start, was he? Is that why the new Builder gets to run as rampant as he does? He's an addendum to whatever you all agreed on in the first place?"

"There are mechanisms in place to control him," the Reaper said.

"That's what Shako was trying to tell me, isn't it? About the handle you've got on his boss. But it's some cludged-together solution that isn't working out for you, isn't it?"

"Many of us who participated in the sundering have come to the conclusion that revisiting that decision would be prudent," the Reaper said.

"Meaning you've finally admitted to yourselves that you cocked-up. The question is, what do you need me for?"

"When the throne was sundered," Raythe said, "specific requirements were put in place to restore it."

Jason looked at the Reaper.

"You didn't want one of your own to fix it, did you? So you made sure none of you could."

"A methodology was put in place, should restoration of the throne prove appropriate," the Reaper said. It closed its eyes, and when it opened them, Velius was back in control, unsteady in his seat.

"You happen to meet the requirements the great astral beings established," Raythe explained to Jason as Velius recovered from the possession.

"What requirements?" Jason asked.

"The idea is to connect to the Sundered Throne during a transcendence process and restore the throne as a part of that. You will be undertaking such a process very soon."

"It won't be full transcendence, only half."

"It is sufficient."

Velius let out a groan, holding his head between his hands.

"I really wish it would just tell me things," he complained. "He saves up everything he wants me to know and then dumps it all on me the next time he's possessing me."

"Like a cosmic skill-book situation?" Jason asked.

"Something like that."

"Regular skill books are bad enough," Jason said. He got up, pulled a sandwich and a drink from his inventory and set them on a side table made of clouds that rose up from the

floor. Velius looked at them blearily and nodded thanks and immediately winced as he moved his head.

“I can’t be the only one who has met your requirements,” Jason said as he returned to his seat. “I know I’m out of the ordinary, but unique in the entire cosmos? Even I’m not arrogant enough to think that. Dawn is transcending, right? Why not her, or some other transcending minion.”

“No servant of the great astral beings can be used,” Raythe explained. “The pacts prevent it.”

“Still, there must be a bunch of people like me when you take the whole damn cosmos into account. And the great astrals beings didn’t decide this yesterday, either. I’m guessing that this choice was made long ago.”

“It was,” Raythe confirmed. “I won’t go into the factors that narrowed the available pool of people; suffice to say that it involves the complexities of interrelated time-streams across different universes. The point is that the great astral beings have been waiting for the right person in the right place at the right time. They believe it is you, here and now.”

“What are these requirements exactly?”

“Someone going through one of a short subset of transcendental methodologies. Even if only to the point of half-transcendence.”

“That subset including becoming what the messengers call an original,” Jason surmised.

“Yes,” Raythe confirmed. “Such instances are common enough, on a cosmic scale. The more difficult requirement is a pre-existing connection to the Sundered Throne.”

“Which I have through my familiar.”

“Yes. The All-Devouring Eye is not one for communicating, even with other great astral beings. But we believe it created the being you named Gordon specifically for this potential outcome.”

“It’s done it before though, hasn’t it?” Jason asked. “I’m not the first guy to get an avatar of doom familiar.”

“You are not,” Raythe confirmed. “And yes, we believe that was the All-Devouring Eye setting things into motion. Perhaps the others did not play out as intended, or they were steps leading to this outcome. There is little point asking questions of the All-Devouring Eye.”

“So why me?” Jason asked. “What makes me different?”

“It’s the power,” Velius said, still woozy but looking better for the food. “If you do this, if you turn the Sundered Throne back into the Cosmic Throne, then you’ll be sitting on it.”