

## Chapter 812

### I Want Those Things For You

Jason looked at the rabbit standing nervously in the hall. His brow furrowed in thought as his mind started putting pieces together. The transformation zone, Healer's missing gift, the rabbit construct he created in his soul space. Now, this rabbit. It was no construct; there was a soul in there.

It was only normal-rank. It must have been terrifying, crossing all those territories when everyone else was so much more powerful than it. It had been looking for him, whether it understood that or not, and now Jason could see why. Its aura had stood out from the moment it arrived, and now it was standing in front of Jason he could see why. He understood it, like an architect looking at plans he had drawn up himself.

Jason knew that he had created this living being, even if he didn't remember doing it. But, however thrown he was by having created a fully realised being, he knew it was nothing compared to what the rabbit was going through. It had just met its maker.

"I can't imagine what you're feeling," Jason said. "Come into my office and sit down. We can try and sort some of it out."

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There was a small town atop the shaft that had carried Jason and his companions deep into the planet. The town had sprung into being quickly, most of the development coming after the expedition had departed. It was a product of the Magic Society, ostensibly built for research, but there was only so much to be learned from a massive hole in the ground. In truth, the town was little more than a luxury resort; a place for the upper echelons of the Magic Society to escape the bleak ruins of Yaresh.

There was a large tea house, a square building composed of mezzanine levels around a central courtyard. There were basement levels catering to appetites beyond those for teas, but the legitimate upper levels did a brisk trade themselves. It was popular with adventurers, merchants and the many other goods suppliers that served the town and its Magic Society patrons.

Two people sat in a room on one of the higher floors, a gauzy curtain screening them from others looking out from their rooms. One was a Celestine with dark skin, silver eyes and a huge silver afro. The other was an elf whose green-flecked hair was a lighter shade of brown than her skin.

Despite their distinctive looks, none of the staff remembered them the moment they looked away. Jason had a similar aura trick to what they were using, but their mastery of it put anything he could do to shame.

"I don't understand the continuing interest in him," the man, Velius, said. "The Builder is done with this world and things are on track to reach stability once again. Yes, the link between worlds needs to be stabilised, but that is just a matter of time now Asano has the messenger magic. He even has that boy the Celestial Book likes so much to help him learn it all. And that's the World-Phoenix's affair anyway. Why isn't her vessel the one languishing on this tedious rock? Why are we here instead of Helsveth?"

"You don't know?" Raythe asked. "The Reaper didn't tell you?"

"He's not exactly chatty. I'm his vessel, not his friend. Were you told by the... what is your great astral being calling itself these days?"

"It is given many names, yet claims none."

Velius groaned, shaking his head.

"That's pretentious on a scale only a great astral being can accomplish. It should pick a damn name, if only to avoid a conversation like this every time someone talks about it."

"My master does not want to be talked about."

"Tough. What do you call it?"

"Master."

Velius rolled his eyes.

"Surely you have a preference," he said.

"I will confess a soft spot for the name 'Keeper of the Sands.' I like the hourglass imagery."

"See? That wasn't hard. And that's a great name. If it doesn't pick a name, people will just call it what they like. I once heard someone call your master 'the Underclock.' That's just terrible."

"Agreed."

"So, you'll suggest to your 'Keeper of the Sands' that it picks a name? It doesn't have to be that one."

"I will not."

"Worth a try. Putting that aside, though, you know why we're here? And why the World-Phoenix's new prime vessel is not?"

"You know the astral beings are factionalising, do you not?"

"They're always factionalising. I've seen signs, but that's nothing new. These linked planets are a flashpoint, but that should be settling down."

“It’s not about the planets anymore. As you said, that is the World-Phoenix’s affair. The concern is Asano. He is a seed that the World-Phoenix planted, but he has grown in ways that no one anticipated. His position at the nexus of various events has seen both our masters take an interest, along with gods and the messengers.”

“Is that what it’s about? Stirring up trouble with the messengers? What do we care if he becomes another original? There are more of them around than most of the astral kings realise. They don’t cause any trouble.”

“It’s not that,” Raythe said.

“Then what is it? What was worth sending you here? The Reaper sending me makes sense. He’s already involved himself with Asano multiple times, with one of his shadows as Asano’s familiar. But what interest does the Keeper of the Sands have in this? Why did it send you here instead of the World-Phoenix sending Helsveth? Is your master going to make one of his oh-so-rare interventions?”

“The World-Phoenix has no representative here because she will be at odds with us in what comes next.”

“Which is what?”

“Asano has started to touch intrinsic-mandate magic.”

“So? Also, how? He’s still mortal.”

“One of his familiars is an avatar of doom. He has already taken steps towards it becoming a Voice of the Will, forging a bond beyond summoner and familiar.”

“Alright. That’s unusual, but he’s not the first. It’s even normal by the standards of original astral kings. That’s not enough to get the Keeper of the Sands moving. Your master has always stood apart, even by the measure of great astral beings. You’re the least active of us all, so what changed? I haven’t even heard of your master intervening since...”

Raythe smiled as her counterpart’s eyes went wide.

“He’s turning an avatar of doom into a Voice of the Will,” Velius said, his voice flat.

“Yes.”

“So, he’s linked to the avatar through that bond. Are you saying that links him, through the avatar, to—”

“Yes.”

“Oh,” Velius said and drained his cup of tea. “Do our astral beings want him to—”

“Yes.”

“And you think my master wants this? Yours was always against the sundering, but mine supported it.”

“It seems that the Reaper has changed its mind. You are in a better position than me to ask.”

Velius let out a long-suffering laugh.

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you?” he said. “That’s because your great astral being actually tells you things. I only ever find them out when mine’s possessing me and the words are coming out of my mouth. When the intent is dancing through my mind like lightning.”

Velius went to pour another cup, found the teapot empty and sighed.

“I need something stronger,” he said. “You’ve been here a while, right?”

“We arrived at this teahouse together.”

“No, I mean on this planet. Have you found anything strong enough to get us drunk?”

“No.”

Velius groaned.

“How much longer is this transformation zone thing going to take?”

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Jason and the child-sized rabbit were in the villain office of Jason’s mountain fortress. The rabbit was on the couch sitting opposite Jason in a cloud chair.

“...was when I realised that the gift Healer gave me was missing,” Jason continued.

“This gift that was meant to let you create a life,” the Rabbit said.

“Yes. I was involved in the inception of this transformation zone. All the things inside of this zone, myself included, were in a state of flux. Anything with a soul remained intact, but everything else was up for being remade. That includes the giant tree out on the horizon that was, as best I can tell, intended to be a soul forge. Somewhere in all that, surrounded by the power of creation, I think I subconsciously tapped into that power and used the gift.”

“To create me.”

“Yes.”

“So, I was some magic puppet you made and then you brought it to life.”

“No. You’re not a puppet. That construct still exists; it’s not you and you’re not it. You are your own entity, complete with a soul. A true being, in your own right. I think I just modelled you after the construct. It wasn’t a conscious act.”

“Why give me the shape of some toy you made?” the rabbit asked.

“Again, I wasn’t making conscious decisions in this. That means I can only try to figure out what was going on in my head when I performed this... act of creation. I like the

rabbit construct. It's fun and happy. If I'm going to create a living thing, I want it to have a life of fun and happiness. I want those things for you."

"What about the rest?"

"The rest?"

"Why was I in that lightning tower."

"I don't know. My best guess would be because I have no idea of what I'm doing."

"Oh, great. That's what everyone wants to hear from their creator. As gods go, you're pretty [bleep] at this."

"I'm not a god."

"Exactly. You're so bad at being a god that you aren't one. This is a total [bleep] show."

"What was that?" Jason asked.

"What is what?"

"The bleeping."

"You don't know?" the rabbit exclaimed, hopping to its feet on the couch. "Oh, great. You did this to me and you don't even know what it is or why?"

Jason winced.

"I might know," he said.

"Then [bleep]ing well tell me, for [bleep]'s sake."

"I can be kind of a prick sometimes."

The rabbit looked at him in disbelief.

"That's it? That's all you've got?"

"It's not what you wanted to hear, I know."

"Not what I wanted to hear? NOT WHAT I WANTED TO HEAR? You [bleep]ing..."

Jason waited through the rabbit's tirade, an indecipherable series of bleeps interspersed with anatomically implausible threats. Despite the comical nature of it, he didn't find it funny at all. While he was coming to grips with having created a living thing like some deity of old, the person he created was much worse off. Coming face to face with his creator should have answered all his questions. Instead, he discovered that his creator was weak, petty and flawed.

After waiting for the rabbit to wind down and collapse back on the couch, emotionally exhausted, Jason spoke.

"I can't make any promises," Jason said, "but I recognise that I have a responsibility to you. I don't know how much I can help you, but I'm willing to try."

Jason got up from his chair.

“Come with me,” he told the rabbit.

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The marina parking lot was mostly empty, a fresh team having just set out to claim another territory. There were still a few people about, mostly lost-looking silver-rankers. Miriam had started excluding people from the teams as the threat grew too great for them to handle. That mostly meant brighthearts, but also the Magic Society researchers. Some were resting in the empty houses but others hovered around, unsure of what to do. They had no tasks but didn't feel right to sit around, doing nothing. As the danger grew, more and more silver-rankers would face the same idle dilemma.

Jason led the rabbit to the soul realm portal currently open near the railing by the water. They stopped in front of it, looking at the rainbow sheet of energy contained in the white stone arch.

“What does it feel like?” Jason asked, his voice carefully neutral. The rabbit took a long time to answer, staring at the archway.

“Home,” he said finally, his voice barely a whisper.

“Do you want to go inside?”

The rabbit nodded and Jason made an inviting gesture. After a glance at Jason, it moved to the arch, hesitating only a moment before stepping through. The rabbit stepped out the other side, wobbling dizzily for a moment. He was unused to portal travel, but the soul realm portal was gentler than a normal one. Otherwise, the rabbit would have been throwing up on the grass.

He looked around, first noticing that Jason had already been waiting when he arrived. He looked between Jason and the portal in confusion.

“An avatar,” Jason explained. “I am everywhere in this place.”

The rabbit looked around. They were in a glade with a small pond, the sun shining down from a sky pleasantly, but not oppressively, warm. Around the glade was forest, with several inviting pathways leading through the trees. The forested areas not on the path looked ordinary but felt ominous.

“The construct,” the rabbit said. “The one that—”

“Gone,” Jason said. “I can recreate it, if you want to see, but it's an empty thing. You are real.”

The rabbit's gaze turned sharply to look at Jason.

“You're real,” Jason repeated. “I know that you feel lost. Uncertain of who you are and what your role in the universe is.”

“Is that why you brought me here? To tell me?”

“That is for you to choose,” Jason said. “I know I disappoint you.”

“It would be nice if the being that created me wasn’t just some guy.”

The avatar looked pointedly at the arch, then vanished. The rabbit looked at the space it had occupied, then back at the portal. The real Jason stepped through and the rabbit felt it, like being caught in a riptide. Jason was connected to this place, far more than simply a person. It felt as if the tide would rise and fall with his breath; that he could bring the night by closing his eyes. His power was unfathomable, the world itself made flesh. This was the Creator he’d been looking for.

The rabbit swallowed hard and suddenly the sensation was gone. Once again, Jason was just a man. Jason smiled, reached out and patted him on the head.

“Your very short,” Jason said.

“Kiss my arse.”

The rabbit’s eyes went wide. He started reeling off profanities, interspersed with joyous laughter. Jason waited patiently for him to settle down, the rabbit standing in front of Jason with a huge grin.

“Is it...?”

“Permanent? Yes. You are my creation. I can change anything about you not shielded by your soul, and that too, if you want. I could turn you into a human. An elf, or a stag. A chainsaw cyborg leonid.”

The rabbit looked down at his hands.

“Could you make me powerful?” he asked.

“Silver-rank is as high as I take it and have you walk out of here safe and whole.”

“Can you make me an essence user?”

“Not at silver-rank. Essences are between you and your soul. Neither gods nor great astral beings can elevate you as an essence user. Not without breaking you. Some things belong to the cosmos.”

“Why am I just a normal-ranker? I did not like having to leave that tower when everyone and everything could have killed me by accident. One sleepy silver-ranker whacks me with a careless arm while yawning and I’m dead. I only left the tower because the one thing worse than leaving was staying there alone.”

“I suspect you are normal-rank because being at the beginning gives you more potential than I can imbue. I can give you power, if that is what you want, but not essence abilities. What I can do is give you essences and let you take them for yourself.”

“How long do I have to choose?”

“As long as you like. If you go back through that portal, you will resume ageing. In here, nothing can harm you. Not even time.”

“Unless you want it to.”

“Yes. But there’s nothing you can do about what I want. The question is, what do *you* want?”

The rabbit frowned, contemplating, before looking back up at Jason.

“A name.”