

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.”