

Chapter 884

If We Can't Change For the Better

Jason slowly recovered as he hobbled along the path of light that stretched from his universe to the castle. The pathway was growing unstable, with parts blurring, dimming or falling away entirely. Jason, his familiars and Arbour were still in the company of Raythe who walked alongside them.

"Why did you stay?" Jason asked her.

"To check on you. Dawn will want to know how you are doing. And to remind you that you and I still have business, beyond that of the cosmic throne."

"What kind of business?"

"That can wait. You've been kept from friends and family long enough, and have plenty to deal with in the aftermath of what just happened. You need to form a prime avatar, and restore the bridge between worlds. That may seem like a small thing after restoring the cosmic throne, but—"

"No," Jason said. "It's not small."

Raythe smiled and nodded.

"You shall see me again when it is done," she told him.

Jason looked around as they drew closer to the end of the path. It terminated in a doorway, floating in the void.

"How are you getting out of here?" he asked. "You can't just float around the astral, right? I know it's borderline for you, but you're still a mortal. Just."

"This space belongs to the throne, and once this path is gone, the avatars of doom will resume their ancient charge. I have a vessel I left at the gateway to your universe."

"It has a gate? My head is still an angry beehive, so I don't have a proper sense of things, yet."

"Yes, it has gateways, although you are the impassable gatekeeper. Your soul is a universe, now. An actual pocket of reality in the astral, so it can be visited. But your universe is also a soul, so it cannot be penetrated without your allowance. Your astral kingdom will never have the vastness of a universe seeded by the Builder, but for all their grandeur, ordinary universes have their time. They die. Yours never will."

"Yeah," Jason said. "I still haven't gotten my head around true immortality. Maybe I should do something that will help me comprehend the vastness of eternity."

"Such as?"

“Well, I could binge-watch one of those soaps that’s been running since the sixties. If that doesn’t feel like eternity, I don’t know what would.”

“You want to watch soap?” Raythe asked.

“Lady Raythe,” Shade interjected. “Mr Asano is immortal, now. I believe that his deeds today will be the start of his life as a cosmic figure of note.”

“Agreed.”

“Allow me to share some wisdom in advance that, with time, will doubtlessly spread across the cosmos: do not ask Mr Asano questions when he says things you do not understand.”

“Wouldn’t that mean you sometimes miss information which is important to know?”

“That price, Lady Raythe, is entirely worth paying.”

They reached the end of the path and entered the doorway in space. The pathway collapsed behind them and a heavy iron door slid across the doorway. They were standing on a catwalk over the magma pit in Jason’s private fortress.

“I guess it’s time to go and see what my universe is like,” he said. “If nothing else, we need to find the exit where our guest parked her car.”

“It is not a car,” Raythe said. “And surely you have recovered enough by now that you can take in the scope of your realm at a thought. It is your true self, after all. You are using that avatar to restrain your mind because you aren’t used to thinking like a transcendent. That body you’re in is not you any more than a breath, expelled from your mouth.”

“Yeah, I could let my mind go all transcendent,” Jason said. “I’ve done it before — with mixed results. But where’s the sense of exploration in that?”

They took an elevating platform into the upper chambers of the fortress. The architecture was classically villainous, all massive hallways of dark metal and bright crimson, with sharp corners and stark decor.

“The layout appears to have changed,” Shade said. “Perhaps you should take Lady Raythe’s advice, lest we wander around lost.”

“What did I just say about a sense of exploration, Shade? The fortress can’t have changed that much.”

“Mr Asano, that sign has directions to an airlock.”

“What?”

Jason and the others were standing on one level of a multi-storey observation lounge, looking through a massive curved window that spanned every level. Through the window they could see an Earth-like planet.

“The shape of this window is rather akin to that of an enormous eye,” Shade observed.

“Is it?” Jason asked innocently.

“Mr Asano, are we in an evil space station in the shape of your head?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“It is, indeed,” Raythe said. “My dimensional vessel is at a docking port. It seems that Asano chose a space station as the first port of call to those who approach his universe through astral travel.”

“I wasn’t really choosing,” Jason said. “This all just kind of happened.”

“Mr Asano, we will need to find a shuttle bay, or a teleportation room or whatever means you have to go to and from this place and the planet. Again, I ask you to allow yourself the knowledge of your new realm’s geography.”

“And deny myself the joy of discovery?”

“I am sorry, Mr Asano, but yes. The longer you wander around aimlessly, the longer until you start reuniting with your loved ones.”

Jason looked over at Shade and sighed.

“Yeah,” he conceded.

Jason stopped letting his consciousness focus into a single avatar and the avatar faded into nothingness. For the first time, Jason allowed himself to be actively conscious of his new nature as a living universe. It was miniscule, as universes went. Just a single planetary system. The sun at its heart blazed not just with heat and light, but with magic.

There was one habitable planet, in a position equivalent to Earth. It was pristine, wild and untamed. The only developed area was Arbour, the tree city where the handful of people residing on the planet were located.

The space station above the planet was the seat of Jason’s power and the reliquary his astral king relics. It also served as an orbital station and point of entry for dimensional visitors.

An avatar reappeared next to Raythe.

“I’ll show you the way to your vessel,” Jason said.

Clive marched back out of his office. His assistant and Miles Cotezee were sharing tea and scones.

Jeff tapped a folder on his table.

“This is what I have so far on the locations of your team members, Archchancellor. I’m still waiting on several more. Don’t expect anything on Asano, Remore and Williams, of course. If they return to this world, I imagine you will know before any source I have.”

“Thank you,” Clive said. “Why hasn’t anyone from cataloguing arrived yet?”

“I believe there was some question of who to send.”

“Why not just send Mickel?”

“Security Director Warnock found out that he was a spy for the Magic Society, Archchancellor. You threw him through the ceiling.”

“That was him?”

“Yes, Archchancellor.”

“Why can’t they decide who to send instead?”

“They’re afraid of being thrown through the ceiling, Archchancellor.”

“Are they spies too?”

“Not that I am aware, Archchancellor. I believe they are concerned about Herbert Norris.”

“Who?”

“The former Vice-Dean of Alchemy. You tossed him through the ceiling for, and I quote, ‘asking inane questions.’”

“Oh, him. He *was* asking inane questions.”

“Some might suggest that was an overreaction, Archchancellor.”

“Would they, now?”

“Actually, no, Archchancellor. They’re afraid of getting thrown through the ceiling.”

Clive made grumbling sounds and took a device off his head. It was a metal headband with four vertical protrusions spaced evenly around it. He placed it on Jeff’s desk, next to the tea tray, and then opened a small portal. He took a document from the portal and sat it next to the headband.

“Take this device down to the procurements office and have them replicate another ten. The designs for it are in the folder. Then send the original back here and the rest to the cataloguing department. I want every single item we have re-examined.”

“What is it?” Miles asked, picking up the headband.

“It’s a device for analysing items using a person’s own aura and magic senses,” Clive said. “Devices like this are nothing new, but the problem was always interpreting the results objectively. I made this years ago, trying to replicate Jason Asano’s ability, but I could never replicate his interface. Now we don’t need to, and it works perfectly.”

Jeff took the device from Miles, grabbed the folder and headed off. Clive took his seat and grabbed a jam and cream scone.

“I imagine that the Adventure Society has a lot of questions,” Clive said to Miles.

“Everyone has a lot of questions, Clive. I was instructed to ask a slew of pointed and forceful questions while being very polite and not making you angry in any way.”

Clive chuckled.

“That reminds me of my Magic Society official days. Trust me, Miles, you want to be on top of the organisational pyramid. Mid-level bureaucracy is no way to live.”

“Unfortunately, the Adventure Society makes you earn your promotions. Maybe I should have joined the Magic Society and bribed my way to the top.”

Clive picked up the folder with the information on his team members and started flicking through the reports.

“I don’t think anyone is getting their answers, Miles. Not until Jason comes back.”

“Can you at least tell me when you expect that to be? If I don’t give my bosses something, they’ll just send me right back here.”

“I can’t be certain when he’ll be back,” Clive said. “If everything went as planned, Jason is a universe now.”

“I’m sorry, did you just say that Asano is a universe?”

“That won’t be news,” Clive said. “After more than a decade of dealing with messengers, the society knows what an astral king is. The question is how quickly Jason can assemble a new body. He needs a prime avatar to go wandering around outside, and they are apparently hard to make.”

“So, you don’t know how long it will take.”

“No, I don’t. Jason has a plan, though.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“Jason’s plans have a way of going really, really bad for someone. Mostly that someone is whoever he’s up against, but not always.”

“And who is it that he’s up against?”

Yumi Asano walked into her office to find an avatar of her grandson sitting in her chair.

“G’day Grandmother.”

Magic left Yumi looking no older than Jason, despite the age difference.

“Jason, do have any idea of the chaos you’ve caused?”

“You know, that’s the same question you ask me every time I visit.”

“That’s because you only ever visit after you’ve tipped over the biggest appcart you can find.”

“I also came by on your birthday.”

“You did,” Yumi conceded. “But most of the time, you aren’t sending these avatars here for social visits. You could have warned us about this System business.”

“No, Grandmother, I couldn’t. Otherwise, I would have. I just repaired one of the key mechanisms of the entire cosmos, and I had no idea how that would go. Was anyone hurt?”

“Was anyone... you can’t just skip past ‘I repaired the cosmos,’ Grandson.”

Yumi staggered as the room pulsed, like a heartbeat. For a fleeting instant, she felt a power so vast it was like catching a glimpse of the universe and seeing how small she was within it.

“You will find, Grandmother, as will the Earth, that on this planet, I can do anything I please. Now, was anyone hurt when the System came into being?”

Yumi looked at Jason warily, not answering. He looked like her grandson, but there was something inside him that was very alien. She couldn’t help but wonder if any of the boy she knew was still in there.

“It is still me, Grandmother. We all change with time, magic or not. If we can’t change for the better, we should at least change in ways that allow us to meet our responsibilities.”

“And what do you see as your responsibilities, Jason?”

“This family. This clan. The people who ended up in this place because of their connection to me. The troubles they’ve faced; being trapped here. A lot of people have been caught in my wake. I can’t give them back the lives they had, but I can at least make sure they aren’t trapped in this astral space. Or stuck in my domains, worried about being grabbed and leveraged by the wider world.”

Yumi nodded.

“I’m glad you understand. People are worried, Jason. Less than fifteen years ago, no one knew magic existed. Now we live in an age of wonders and horrors. This magical realm is lovely, but we’ve been trapped here for years. There are children in here who have never seen the world outside. Teenagers who have lived their whole lives inside your domains. How will you fix that? Or even get back to it? If you can do anything you want, why haven’t you restored the domains and kicked out all the vampires?”

“I’ll get to that. How many people were hurt when the System first appeared?”

“Isn’t this place a part of you? Can’t you just tell?”

“Things were hazy for me at that time the system appeared.”

“We suffered little. A few scrapes and bruises. Taika’s mother fell off her scooter, but she wasn’t hurt. She’s bronze rank and was wearing enchanted riding gear.”

“That’s good.”

“Now, why are there still vampires sitting over our heads?”

“I need to make what’s called a prime avatar. Avatars like this one can’t leave my territory, but a prime avatar can. I won’t go into the specifics, but basically I have cosmic power and mortal power. The prime avatar is tied to my mortal power, which is much lower than my cosmic aspect. Accumulating the power to create such an avatar would take twenty-seven years at my current strength.”

“What does that have to do with vampires?”

“The most powerful vampires on Earth got that way by consuming blood infused with power stolen from reality cores.”

“I am aware.”

“The power of those cores is the kind I need to make an avatar. And, while I didn’t use it much, I’ve always had the ability to strip it right out of the vampires. That’s what I’m going to do.”

“They aren’t going to enjoy that, are they?”

“No, Grandmother. They are not.”

“Good.”