

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.

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.