

## Chapter 593

### Astral Emperor

Jason's astral throne was a hammock chair. He made a spreading gesture and it became a hanging chair with room for two.

"Join me, Space Princess?"

Dawn shook her head as they sat together. The chair swivelled to face the wall behind them, which was the back wall of the lengthy hall. The wall sank into the floor, opening up to give them a view of Jason's soul space island. A pleasant breeze wafted in.

"Hey," Jason said thoughtfully. "I can't penetrate a soul, even here, but what about stripping off some gunk that's been painted over the top of one."

"You're talking about the Order of the Redeeming Light people."

"Them, vampires, whoever. Anyone who's had some nasty goo drizzled over their soul. It would be nice if I could undo what's been done to Sophie's mum."

"You remember what I said about natural processes. If you just magic it away, the modifications you made to the people would kill them the moment they left your soul space. You would need to understand the process of extricating the taint without the person dying."

"I can't do anything for them, then?"

"It may not be entirely hopeless. I imagine that one of the larger problems with undoing such deep-rooted transformations is that taking someone from a vampiric or similar state is too traumatising for the body. The cure would kill."

"You're thinking Carlos can help?"

"It's possible," Dawn said. "If he can help you understand the process of taking someone from a live tainted state to a live untainted state, you might be able to skip the middle part."

"Which is the bit where they die horribly?"

"It is. Under normal conditions, the transition phase is lethal, but here it doesn't have to be. So long as you're able to follow the actual process, it might be possible."

"It doesn't sound like the easy solution I was hoping for."

"Is it ever?"

"I'll need to learn how it all works pretty thoroughly, from what you're describing."

"Yes, but not the level of an expert. So long as you have a respectable grasp of what's going on, you should be able to find success."

"It's still going to take a lot of time."

“But time well spent, don’t you think?”

“I’m not sure I’ll have that time if I’m leaving Rimaros.”

“Perhaps.”

Jason’s eyes narrowed as he looked at her with suspicion.

“Have you been hatching plots and schemes during my convalescence?”

“You’ll have to wait and see. Where did you put the astral gate?”

“Do most astral kings put it with their astral throne?”

“Yes, it’s normally in the throne room.”

“So, other astral kings have throne rooms as well? And you were judging me.”

“What did I say that was judgemental?”

“I could feel you judging me. There was a vibe.”

“A vibe?”

“Yes, a vibe. Are you denying the judgy vibe?”

“No,” Dawn conceded. “But in my defence, you are wearing a top hat.”

“And I look very dapper.”

Jason was still wearing the magician tuxedo he had changed his clothes into.

“Hey, there’s a colourful scarf in my pocket. Will you pull it out for me?”

“No.”

Jason let out a disappointed sound and took off his top hat, turning it over and looking down into it.

“Sorry, bloke; she’s not into it. It’s going to be rabbit stew. Yes, I thought girls were into magic tricks too. No, she’s definitely won’t let me saw her in half.”

“Jason, please stop.”

A rabbit poked its head out of the hat, resting its front paws on the brim.

“Look, lady,” it said. “If you don’t like magic, that’s your business, but we’re having a conversation here. So unless you’re interested in picking a card or something, how about you jog on.”

“Hey,” Jason told it. “Don’t be rude.”

“Don’t you start,” the rabbit told him. “I’m not the one having a conversation with a rabbit he invented.”

Dawn got up out of the chair.

“I’m going to go find the astral gate,” she told him, and then set off for the elevating platform.

“Look what you did,” the rabbit told Jason as they watched her walk away. “You are terrible with women.”

“Says the guy who’s meant to be my wingman.”

“I’m an imaginary rabbit!”

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On an elevating platform with Jason, Dawn shot more than one wary glance at the top hat now back on his head.

“I get the difference between a god and a great astral being,” Jason said as the platform carried them down through the building. “Where do astral kings fit in?”

“Somewhere in the middle,” Dawn told him. “Great astral beings are in charge of the cosmos and inhabit the deep astral. Gods are like regional managers of full-blown universes. Astral kings are what amounts to sentient miniature universes.”

“I’m a mini-universe?”

“Jason, we’re inside your soul. In an elevator.”

“Fair enough. This is a weird day. I mean, it’s been a weird few years, but finding out I’m a mini-universe is way up there as weird days go. Definitely top eight.”

“Top eight?”

“The list doesn’t always have to be a top ten.”

“What are the other seven?”

“I once found a pickle that looked like Bryan Cranston. *Breaking Bad* Bryan Cranston, not *Malcolm in the Middle* Bryan Cranston.”

“The day you found a pickle is up there with finding out you’re a miniature universe?”

“You didn’t let me finish. I then found another pickle – the same day, mind you – that looked like *Malcolm in the Middle* Bryan Cranston.”

She gave him a flat look.

“It had fallen in some hair,” he explained. “It was kind of gross to pick up, but how could you not?”

“Very, very easily, I suspect. What were you doing that you kept finding pickles?”

“Water skiing.”

“You found multiple pickles while water skiing?”

“I told you it was a weird day.”

The elevating platform reached the ground floor atrium and kept descending into the sub-levels. Unlike the upper levels, where the open-sided platform allowed passengers to look around, the subterranean levels were encased in a cylinder.

“I thought this would feel more like a normal elevator,” Jason said, “but it feels more like the elevator stage from a side-scrolling beat ‘em up.”

“Is that a video game?”

“Yeah. They always have an elevator level where mooks just keep jumping in to fight.”

Jason looked up at the tunnel they were descending through just as ninjas started dropping down, landing in a fighting pose.

“Jason...”

“Fine,” Jason sulked, the ninjas vanishing at a dismissive gesture from him. “You’re no fun.”

She looked at him from under raised eyebrows.

“Okay, you’re a little fun.”

“How did you have so much trouble with changing the light, yet ninjas and a talking rabbit aren’t a problem?”

“It’s about understanding, like you said. I don’t know anything about light refraction, but I know plenty about ninjas.”

“You do?”

“Sure. Like those ninjas just now. I knew they weren’t a threat because there were too many of them.”

“How is having too many a threat?”

“Ninjutsu is a finite resource. One ninja is dangerous because they have all the ninjutsu, but a bunch of them in the same place spreads it too thin. It’s the law of Conservation of Ninjutsu.”

“That’s not a law.”

“It is now.”

“I think I need to get you out of this place,” Dawn said. “It’s like you’re trying to recreate *Alice in Wonderland*, but with tragic eighties references.”

“I’m doing no such thing. And what do you mean, tragic?”

“It’s like you’re trying to be the *Alice in Wonderland* equivalent of *Team Knight Rider*.”

“That’s just low.”

The elevating platform stopped and they stepped out into a tunnel that had a mosaic tile floor tiled in shades of teal. What drew the attention, though, was that the walls and ceiling were glass, on the other side of which was water filled with aquatic life. There was no lighting, but the teeming sea life was all bioluminescent.

“I like this,” Dawn said.

There was a small tramcar waiting, more like a golf buggy on a rail, that took off as soon as they say down.

“I could have just moved us instantaneously to the destination,” Jason pointed out.

“Jason, you could have left us where we were and moved the entire reality so the destination came to us.”

“Uh, sure,” Jason said. “But sometimes, life is about the journey. Isn’t that what your boss wanted me to remind you of when it sent you to me?”

“I suppose it was, in a way.”

“It’s not just pretty down here, though,” Jason said. “The astral gate is the centre of all the magic coming in from the astral. All the water in the domain – the magical arteries – originates out of the spot we’re heading to. It’s the real heart of the place.”

“What sense do you get from the astral gate?” Dawn asked.

“I can feel it’s a gateway to the deep astral, and I can pull a good chunk of magic in through it. I can probably use it to recharge my mana quickly, although I suspect it wouldn’t be a smooth process. I’m pretty sure filtering raw magic through my soul realm to refine it into mana would sting like a right prick. Beyond using it as a battery for my spirit domains, though, I’m a bit wary of using it.”

“Good,” Dawn said as they approached the end of the tunnel. “The astral throne is something you should be able to get a handle on now because it governs your soul space’s internal functions. The astral gate is about interacting with dimensional forces outside of your domains.”

“Poking my head out into the cosmos.”

“Yes. Which you should hold off on for quite some time.”

“I got that impression myself,” he said, pointing at the massive doors at the end of the tunnel. They were heavy industrial steel, with a large white sign with plain red lettering.

**SUPER DANGEROUS MAGIC STUFF – DO NOT COME IN.**

Jason casually gestured and the doors opened with a reluctant squeal of metal. Behind them was another set of doors and another sign.

**CLIVE, WHAT DID I JUST SAY?**

Jason open these doors as well, revealing a third set.

**SERIOUSLY, CLIVE, TURN BACK. THE NEXT SIGN IS JUST AN ANIMATED IMAGE OF YOUR PARENTS GOING AT IT IN AN EEL TANK. THERE’S SOUND AND EVERYTHING. IT’S SUPER GROSS.**

“How many of these door’s are there?” Dawn asked.

“Another eight or nine. They get pretty graphic after the sixth one, so I’ll just delete them up to the end.”

“More graphic than Clive’s parents in an eel tank?”

“Oh, yeah. The eighth door has animated tentacles with... how much anime did you watch while you were on Earth?”

“A bit.”

“Then I’ll just say it’s bad. You can probably imagine.”

Jason gestured again and the tunnel was suddenly empty, up to a last set of doors some way further down. They started walking, going over one wet section of the floor, and another that was sticky.

“What was that?” Dawn asked.

“Do you really want to know?”

“No, now that you ask.”

“Just be sure and wash your shoes. Actually...”

Jason wandered over to the glass separating them from the bioluminescent sea creatures and conjured a small vial into his hand. Then he tapped on the glass and a small keg-style tap appeared. He filled the vial, closed the tap and it melded back into the glass wall.

“Here you go,” he said, handing the vial over to Dawn. She held it up in front of her face, peering at it, then at the outside of the glass tunnel.

“Jason, did you make a subterranean crystal wash reservoir and stock it with glowing fish?”

“Absolutely not. The cleanliness of these fish is a coincidence. Let’s check out that last door, yeah?”

Dawn shook her head as Jason moved on. She poured the crystal wash over her sticky shoes before following along. The last door also had a sign.

OKAY, CLIVE, I KNOW YOU HAD HELP TO GET THIS FAR. BELINDA, SHAME ON YOU. I HOPE YOU AT LEAST GAVE CLIVE SOME FRESH PANTS AFTER DOOR NINE.

“Clive’s a pretty persistent guy when it comes to new astral magic,” Jason said.

“Oh, I know,” Dawn said. “He’s been very dogged in asking for guidance since I started spending more time in your cloud building. He even brought me flowers, once.”

“Oh, that’s sweet.”

The last doors were the end of the tunnel, where it met a stone wall. The doors parted at a gesture from Jason, opening into a massive sea cave grotto. It was roughly circular, with a metal catwalk winding its way around, bolted into the stone. The water below glowed with a blue light, which was the only illumination in the room. In the centre of the water, a plume of water was in a constant state of geysering up, making the air wet with mist.

“There's a lot of unadulterated magic in these droplets,” Dawn observed. “If I weren't diamond rank, or if you weren't untouchable in this place, it would be very dangerous in here.”

“I put up like a dozen huge locked doors with warning signs. What else do you want? An electric fence?”

“You could seal it off entirely.”

“No. The magic needs to flow from here, and I don't want Clive trying to swim up a tunnel of raw magic so he can poke the source with a stick.”

Dawn leaned on the rail and looked at the geyser. Like all the water, it shone with a blue light.

“You know the Builder is assembling his own world from the parts he steals by plundering planets of their astral spaces for parts.”

“Yeah, it's his whole deal.”

“He's trying to become not just a god but an astral king version of a god. To embody the world he's created, on a scale unlike anything ever seen.”

“Like an astral emperor.”

“If you like. No one knows why he's doing it.”

“I think your boss knows. I'd be willing to put money down that she's somehow involved in his motivation for assembling that thing. The way she flipped his switch like that is super suspicious.”

Dawn frowned.

“Sorry; I know you don't like me ragging on the World-Phoenix.”

“It's not that,” Dawn said. “Almost the opposite, in fact.”

“What do you mean?”

“Every time we've discussed what the World-Phoenix did to the Builder, my instinct has been to dismiss it and move on. Now I find that impetus is absent. I would seem that the World-Phoenix has a subtle influence that even I was unaware of.”

Both of their thoughts turned to the currently inactive star seed within Dawn.

“You know, Carlos knows the process to safely extract a star seed. I could go get it and have that thing out of you right quick.”

“No thank you, Jason. You don't have to agree with everything your employer does to work for them.”

“Yeah, but this isn't ethically sourced coffee in the break room, Dawn. You probably run around saving universes and whatnot. We're talking about squijillions of lives.”

“Squijillions?”

“I had to call it something, and the numbers that high don’t have names. I’m pretty sure at that point they stop really being numbers.”

“What are you talking about? Numbers don’t stop being numbers.”

“I’ve heard that if you go high enough, the numbers go all funny. Like reality at the edge of an astral space. It’s a maths thing, right?”

“No,” Dawn said. “That’s not how mathematics works. At all.”

“So, no star seed extraction?”

“No. And it may be time to call it a night. You seem to have a handle on the throne and the gate. The throne is safe to play with, and you’re getting good use from the gate without playing with forces you shouldn’t. The only thing you should know is that you may find yourself able to tap into the powers of the gate and throne to enhance some of your abilities. At your rank, you must do so carefully and infrequently. The backlash will be nothing compared to what you’ve just been through, but it will probably put you out of whatever fight you were in. Especially the astral gate.”

“Well then,” Jason mused. “Whatever shall we do with the rest of our evening?”