

Chapter 875

Hope Only Needs a Chance

Jason stepped out of a monster's shadow, his blade already flickering through the air. All around him, a sea of monsters were slowing down and dying under the effects of his afflictions. It didn't put much of a dent in their overall numbers as, like Jason, they would just respawn. He was satisfied, though, to be forcing those respawns instead of struggling just to stay alive.

That feeling of power came to an end when the World-Phoenix arrived. Her superhero landing sent out a ring of fire that expanded in a flash, incinerating everything in its path. It reduced a large circle of her own forces to ash that drifted on wind kicked up by the heat.

Jason was caught in it as well. His amulet had built up a powerful stack of shields, one for each infliction delivered to the monster army. Even so, the fire burned through them all, along with Jason's blood robe, to scorch his flesh black. All the shield stacks were converted to healing as they were consumed, and added to Jason's already considerable regeneration. His flesh and skin grew back, as did his robe.

The World-Phoenix hadn't moved from where she landed, massive wings of fire rising from her back. The monsters hadn't swarmed back in to fill the empty space either. They weren't mindless brutes but vessels for nameless great astral beings, and not stupid enough to re-enter the blast zone. That left Jason and the World-Phoenix staring at each other in a makeshift arena, surrounded by monsters.

The World-Phoenix looked like the hero to Jason's villain. She was draped in loose white clothing, tinted with orange and yellow. With her massive wings of fire, she had the fierce beauty of an avenging angel. The heat from her blazing wings stirred up the air, causing her long red hair to dance around her head.

Jason was a sinister figure with his void cloak and robes the colour of dried blood. His nebulous eyes looked out from the dark hood that shrouded his features, and the stench of charred flesh hung around him. They stood, unmoving, while the battle raged around them, yet did not close in. In a storm of violence, they stood in the eerily calm eye.

"Why do you struggle?" the World-Phoenix asked. A trick of aura allowed her voice to carry over the sounds of unbridled magical warfare.

"Isn't struggling the whole point?" Jason asked, copying the voice projection technique.

“Give up while you still have willpower to keep your mind and personality intact. I have no need to rip them apart unless you make me.”

“Make you? Lady, you’re the one who invaded my soul; I didn’t ask you to come here. Why are you even doing this? You know the price of leaving the throne as it is. What do you get out of this fight?”

“You think the sundering is such an ancient event, predating the universe that spat you out. On a cosmic scale, you, your universe and this new Builder are nothing. The astral has no time of its own. We mark the passage of events using the life and death of universes like the ticking of a clock. A clock more complex than your mind will ever comprehend, even when you are an astral king. The astral kings are children, with minds still stuck in mortal ways of thinking. With time they will, perhaps, learn to comprehend eternity. For now, even the oldest of them are too young for that to have happened yet.”

“Well, that was a cracker of a monologue,” Jason said. “I didn’t love my cosmic insignificance being the central theme, but I can appreciate the effort. Was that off the cuff, or have you been rehearsing it in your head while you fight me and your friends? I’ve got to say, though, your central thesis is a little undermined by your having sought me out. More than once, at this stage. I mean the first time, sure. You gave me a token and let me go on my way. One more pawn on your very big and complicated board. But this time, you came to me. You’re playing on my board. Telling me how insignificant I am when you all came into my house rings hollow. Also, you’re not the only one who can monologue. I may not be able to match you in a fight, but if you want a melodrama battle, that’s a whole other story.”

“That your soul is the location of this conflict matters not at all,” The World-Phoenix said. “We, the great astral beings, are the ones that matter. When we walk on the dirt, the dirt is not hallowed by our passage.”

“I’m pretty sure a lot of religions disagree, but I’ll accept it as a valid counterpoint.”

“You lack the ability to conceive all that has passed in the vast span of the cosmos. The sundering is the oldest event you know of, yet it is to us as recent as last week is to you. I cannot explain how limited you are because you’re too limited to understand. You are so simple that you think time and space are different things.”

“Yeah, I never did get around to that Stephen Hawking book my Nan got me for my birthday. But your point is made. There’s only so many ways you can explain that you are very big and I am very small before the motif becomes repetitive. It sounds like you’re trying to get me to do that scene from Monty Python where they keep telling God how huge he is, and I’m not going to do it. Okay, I’ll do it. Oooh Lord, you are so very big. We’re

all really impressed down here, I... You know, I'm getting this wrong. I haven't seen it in a while. You remember the scene, right?"

"Yes," the World-Phoenix said, drawing the word out like a threat. "You have filled this ridiculous body with worthless knowledge."

"Ridiculous? I modelled that after Dawn, who was your prime vessel. I even gave it bigger... fiery wings."

The World Phoenix glared at Jason and conjured a whip of dancing fire into her hand.

"I'm not going to enjoy this, am I?" Jason asked.

"No."

"Just so you know, I've changed my safe word. The new one is 'coquettish.'"

The World-Phoenix launched herself forward, blazing wings leaving a trail of sparks behind her. Jason fought with a greater command of skill and strategy than he ever had before. He fought hard, he fought fast and he fought smart. He also fought briefly, and was soon respawning further down the road.

While Jason had certainly improved against the horde of monsters possessed by the nameless great astral beings, things were very different against the World-Phoenix. She had the advantage in power, speed and strength. Where he had worked hard to adapt his abilities for open combat, hers had been ideal from the beginning. After years of fighting, his skills had grown considerably, but she had seen him perfecting all his tricks. For all that Jason had advanced, he remained staggeringly far behind.

When the war in Jason's soul first began, the rest breaks were short and the battles were long. Years later, the breaks were extending. Jason's abilities had pushed into the higher reaches of silver and the old ways of advancement were becoming less effective. As he had been warned, the path forward was shifting from external pressures to inner enlightenment.

In this, Jason found himself well prepared. Ever since leaving Earth, coming to grips with who and what he was had been a consuming preoccupation. He had spent years in introspection, on his own and with the help and guidance of others. Arabelle Remore especially had been readying him for this stage. Alongside that, Jason had been pushed to the limit over and over.

Hard choices had forced Jason to confront who he was and who he was willing to become. To decide what he was willing to accept and when to be defiant, whatever the cost. As a result, Jason's transition to a more contemplative form of advancement went very smoothly, his abilities not slowing in their growth.

Jason could feel his approach to gold rank, seeing an open path with no obstructions in his way. The only issue was the willpower being cut away in battle, but that wouldn't get in his way. He had more than enough remaining to reach his advancement first.

Progress centred on his essences. His soul was the power, but they were the shape. They found parts of himself and drew them to the fore. Advancement required Jason to understand that process, pushing it forward and smoothing it out. He'd been warned that doing so improperly could have detrimental affects on one's personality.

This was part of the reason why those who advanced to gold through monster cores could suffer personality deviations. It was rarely a large problem, with petty, arrogant and selfish behaviour being the most common result. Given that monster core users at that level were usually aristocratic scions who were handed their positions, it was hard to tell whether the cores actually did anything or if that was just their personality.

There were instances of more extreme behaviour, however, with people becoming depraved, twisted and outright malevolent. There were certain essences known to present a higher danger of this, including the dark and blood essences possessed by Jason.

He wasn't a core user, though, so he wasn't worried his essences would negatively affect him. He was going to be fine; there was nothing to worry about. Any concerning behaviour he demonstrated in the past was just run of the mill psychological trauma, not the start of a magical descent into depravity and madness.

His meditation having gone rather off track, Jason opened his eyes and saw the World-Phoenix eating a bagel. He got to his feet and went to the bagel cart. It was manned by one of his one-eyed avatars who assembled his meal telekinetically. Ingredients floated through the air and jalapeño cream cheese spread itself across the bagel. Jason took his food and walked over to stand beside the World-Phoenix. She was standing alone, looking out at the jungle.

"How are you doing it?" she asked, before he could say anything.

"Doing what? Getting my butt kicked for years in a row? That just kind of happens."

"Things are changing. Restrictions we put in place after the sundering are beginning to unravel. You're repairing the throne already."

"Am I?"

"How are you doing it?"

"With rakish good looks?"

"There are rules."

"My rules. There are restrictions on what I can do with them, but this is my house. I know that any level of ignorance or any need to make concessions is foreign to you. But

you're the one that came in here, knowing that it was my game you'd be stuck playing. And I still don't understand why you did. What are you so loathe to let go of, that you'd let the cosmos fall into chaos? I understand that the Cosmic Throne is an authority you don't want to be under. The irony of an antiauthoritarian like me trying to reinstate a system displaced by rebellion isn't lost on me."

She turned to look at him before returning her gaze to the jungle.

"I told you that what you see as ancient is recent for my kind."

"Yep."

"The Builder is not the first great astral being to change. Long before the sundering, there was no World-Phoenix. There was a great astral being called the Boundary. But it wanted to be more than it was. More than its role."

"It sanctioned itself."

"Yes. The Boundary was gone and the World-Phoenix came into being. The Cosmic Throne did not accede easily to changes in the grand order. It resisted my decision to become something other than what the cosmos decided I should be. It was a constant fight to not be turned back into what I was. The sundering freed me from that pressure."

"And now I am trying to restore the source of that pressure."

"Yes."

"I'd like to tell you that I can change it. That I can restore the throne in such a way that you can be what you choose. But I can't offer you that. There's no easy solution."

"I am aware. The passive effects of the throne's restoration will be disruptive enough. If you try to make active use of the power, the ripples of that choice are incalculable."

"On Earth we call it the butterfly effect."

"It frustrates me that they chose you. Although I resist oversight in my role, I still fulfil my purpose as a great astral being. Restoring the integrity of your universe matters, and you were my solution to resolve that danger. Fighting you here works against that purpose, and doing so costs me more than you understand."

"I'm sorry. I really am. But I'm fighting for the integrity of the cosmos."

"This was not your fight. They brought you into this."

"The way you brought me in to saving the Earth. That argument gets you nowhere."

"I suppose not. It is hard to think, in this body. Even as it gets closer to gold rank, it is still so limited. We use vessels at the peak of mortal power for a reason."

"I'm not imagining it, then," Jason said. "You are getting stronger. I was kind of hoping I could rank up and turn this whole thing around."

"You actually thought that would happen?"

“No, but hope only needs a chance; it doesn’t have to be a good one.”

“That is a very mortal way of thinking.”

“Sometimes you need a mortal way of thinking. You have to defy the odds if you want to make miracles.”

She turned to look at Jason again. This time, her gaze lingered.

“I am glad that I sent Dawn to you.”

“Really? I thought you’d be cranky at how you and her aren’t on the same page as much as you were.”

“I don’t need her to be like me. That defeats the purpose. I need vessels that will see things in ways I will not on my own. Choosing those who do not align perfectly with my ideals shortens the time they can be my vessels. Other great astral beings choose vessels more aligned with themselves, so they last longer. I consider this short-sighted. My hierophants, those who were once my vessels, still serve me. They are more independent than they were, but that makes them more valuable in many ways.”

“You don’t hold disagreement with you against them?”

“On the contrary, that is their role. Dawn does not want me to win this fight. She believes that I won’t. I had thought her naïve until I felt the changes begin and realised that the throne is already being restored. How are you doing that?”

“I’m still not telling.”

“It was worth a try.”

Jason grinned.

“Despite your complaints,” he said, “I have an inkling that you and the others are beginning to enjoy being stuck in mortal bodies. In spite of yourselves.”

“We do not occupy our own vessels for anywhere near so long as we have these ones you have provided. It is a novel experience, and our kind do not get those often.”

Jason nodded.

“I’m not going to say that I hope you win,” he said. “But I hope that, when all this is done, things go well for you.”

“Even though we are enemies?”

“I don’t think we’re enemies. We just want different things. The Builder is an enemy, even if he’s on my side for now. I don’t like what you all did to him, though. It doesn’t excuse what he’s done, but given what you’ve just told me, I’m surprised you went along with treating him that way.”

“It seemed easy to justify when I was thinking more broadly. A mortal mind has a different view of moral dilemmas. A great astral being has no empathy. That is why we

have vessels, and why those vessels need to stay grounded. I did not want Dawn to lose that when she was so close to transcending. It would be harder to get it back once she left mortality behind.”

“I worry about that for myself,” Jason said. “I’m in my thirties and I’ve gone through so many changes. What is eternity going to do to me?”

“When you are immortal, every tribulation has its time and everything passes. Even the Builder, with what we have done to him, understands that. Whatever you go through, whatever is done to you, eternity gives you the time to make of yourself what you will. We are each responsible for who we become. No excuses.”