

Chapter 873

Why He Hasn't

Jason thought he would never endure pain as comprehensive as the Builder's attack on his soul. The Cosmic Throne proved him to be profoundly mistaken. His true body was now an entire universe, and only an avatar had sat on the throne. Even so, the agony was mind-blanking. He awoke, face down on the throne room's grimy floor, having tumbled off the throne and down the stairs of the dais.

"Is it done?" he managed to croak out.

"It is done," Raythe said.

Jason rolled onto his back with a groan, then pushed himself to a sitting position. He looked around and saw that all the great astral beings were gone. Only Raythe remained, but her aura made clear that she was no longer possessed. The only other people in the room were Jason's familiars and the avatar of the tree city.

"How long was I out?" he asked.

"That is complicated," Raythe said. "We are at the boundary of reality and unreality, where time is subjective at best and arguably doesn't exist at all."

"Okay, that's the long answer. Is there a short one?"

"Approximately seven hours, if we leave this place soon," Shade said.

"Which I highly recommend," Raythe said. "The time here is synchronised with your universe while this castle is still connected to it, which it will only be for a short amount of subjective time. It would be best if you don't arrive back in your universe a year from now. Or a year before now. You don't have to rush out the door, but don't tarry longer than you need to recover."

"Yeah, I don't think I'll be doing any rushing," Jason said. "The great astral beings didn't gather dust, though, did they?"

"When it was done, it was done," Raythe said. "There was no purpose in lingering."

"They didn't draw anything on my face before they left, did they?"

"No."

Jason groaned again as he got unsteadily to his feet.

"That shook my soul like it was a snow globe. Did it have any impact on my domains? More importantly, the people in them?"

"No. It was your mortal aspect that was inadequate to endure the task. Your transcendent aspect is a universe and can soak up a few spiritual tremors."

"That's good."

He winced as he rubbed his temples with the heels of his hand.

“I don’t suppose you know a good hangover cure.”

“For the backlash of setting the new status quo for the cosmos while still mortal? I’m afraid you’ll need to ride that one out, Jason Asano.”

“How bad did I mess it up?”

“The great astral beings are satisfied. That is as much as any could ask from you, and more than we expected.”

“All of them are satisfied? Or a motion-passing plurality, with the rest looking to hunt me down for revenge.”

“The nameless are unhappy, as they would be with anything short of complete cosmic anarchy. They will not seek you out. The others are satisfied.”

“Even the World-Phoenix?”

“It would seem that the restoration of the throne set a new status quo based on things as they were at the moment of restoration. The World-Phoenix in its current state is now its new baseline.”

“Winners all around, then. Now, what did I get wrong?”

“Wrong is not the right word. There were changes, and not all from you. After sundering the throne, the great astral beings placed strictures on the cosmic order, to maintain stability. They are now releasing those strictures.”

“Any of them I need to know about right now?”

“Not from what they have done.”

“Meaning there’s something I did that I need to know about.”

“You will be able to sense it once your soul recovers from the shock. The throne could never be restored to what it was. Part of you was imprinted upon it. An echo of you, spread across the cosmos.”

“Did I just make Airwolf real in every universe?”

“No. You made your interface available to everyone with essences or the potential to get them.”

“Huh. Is that with all the special features?”

“Not as a default. It allows for people to view their own information and nothing more, but that has already started to change. Species gift evolutions and even essence abilities are expanding the base effects, just as yours did.”

“How did the cosmos spring this on people? Just windows popping up in front of them?”

“Yes.”

“Did everyone freak out?”

“Surprise was a common reaction, yes.”

“How many people died?”

“The interface, or the System, as it’s calling itself, appeared to wait for a moment of safety before revealing itself to individuals.”

“So, no traffic accidents because a window popped up in people’s faces?”

“I won’t say there weren’t mishaps, but most of the deaths came from reactions to the System, not the System itself. Religious furore, superstition. Mass killings to keep the new power from teaching things to oppressed members of society.”

Jason hung his head.

“I got people killed, then.”

“You may have reshaped the cosmos, Asano, but do not consider yourself so grand as to own tribalism, greed and prejudice. People are responsible for their own actions, and ignorance will take any excuse it can get. I shouldn’t need to tell you that.”

“I suppose not.”

Jason turned to look down the hallway out.

“We should probably head back to my universe, right? I can feel this place detaching itself.”

Miles Cotezee, a senior Adventure Society official, hurried through the Vitesse campus of the Magic Research Association campus. The always busy grounds were even more so than normal in the wake of what had just happened. Fortunately, Vitesse had not fallen into chaos. It took more than an illusionary window that told you your essence advancement to upset the cart. In a major adventuring city, it was just the latest oddity in a world full of bizarre events. If anything, it was refreshing that the new magic thing wasn’t actively trying to kill them.

The nature of this new ‘System’ was not completely alien to members of the major organisations in Vitesse and around the world. No small amount of analysis had been dedicated to Jason Asano’s abilities and the System was swiftly linked to him. As such, the Adventure Society had deployed Miles to seek out Clive Standish.

Miles had worked with Clive, Belinda and Sophie when the three of them were tracing a portal magic network the Builder cult had used. That was at a time when Asano was believed dead and their team was scattered in various pursuits.

Standish had been silver rank when Miles worked with him, and was best known as a team member of Danielle Geller’s son. Things were very different now. From revealing the

impending messenger invasion to building a rival to the Magic Society, Standish was well and truly famous in his own right.

In just a handful of years since its inception, the Magical Research Association had exploded into prominence. While the Magic Society leveraged its research and secrets for political power, the MRA gave open access to records and research libraries. Many of the most prominent academics continued to side with the Magic Society for the greater personal gain. The MRA was, instead, a bastion for young, bold and innovative researchers.

The openness of the research association plundered patronage that once would have gone to the Magic Society. Compared the society hoarding their knowledge for political gain, organisations funded the MRA knowing the results would be freely available. Government authorities, the Adventure Society and a variety of Churches, especially that of Knowledge, all contributed. More than just funding, they were a shield against the Magic Society as it tried to crush its upstart rival.

The future of the MRA looked bright, despite the Magic Society's best efforts. They were already closely associated with the new sky communication network, and there were rumours of a transportation network being quietly researched. This was the result of years of study into the same network Clive had been tracking years earlier.

Miles and Clive had remained friendly over the years, making him the natural person to send when the Adventure Society wanted something from Clive and his association. The MRA campus was swarming with people in the wake of what had happened, but Miles was a known factor. He entered the administration building and managed fight his way to Clive's office through only a minimum of bureaucratic run around.

Miles counted nine people gathered in the spacious outer office. This included Clive's assistant, Jeff, at his desk. Miles recognised a few upper-echelon members of the association, plus members of various other societies, associations and institutes. They were standing in silence with uncomfortable expressions on their faces. Miles realised why when moans of pleasure emanated through the closed door of the inner office.

"Oh, yeah. That's the stuff," Clive's voice came through the door. "I've been waiting for this for so long. Knowing I could do this and having it denied to me was torturous. It's like something that's been pent up for years has started gushing out of me."

Miles moved up to Jeff.

"Who is he in there with?"

"I have no idea, Mr Cotezee," Jeff said. "No one came through this way, so they must have portalled in. His wife, maybe?"

“Have you ever seen her?” Miles said. “The Adventure Society has been trying to identify her for years.”

“No, I’ve just heard his friends talking about her, and he doesn’t like it when they do.”
Jeff leaned in closer.

“I don’t think the marriage is in the best shape,” he said in a conspiratorial whisper. “They don’t seem to spend a lot of time together, and I’ve heard, she’s quite... free with her affections.”

An excited noise came from the inner office.

“Oh, wow! I didn’t think so much would come out just from rubbing the shaft!”

Miles and Clive shared a look until Clive’s door burst open and he emerged holding a magical staff. Sparks were streaming out from a metal cup set into the end.

“Jeff! Get someone from the Item Catalogue Department over here. They wildly miscategorised what this thing does. And see if you can find out where my party members are. I think we’ll be getting together soon.”

Clive finally seemed to notice all the people, panning his gaze over them unhappily.

“Yes, this was Jason,” he told them. “No, I don’t know how. Yes, I have guesses; no, I won’t tell you what they are. Now, all of you go away.”

“Archchancellor Standish, I need to talk to about — AARGH!”

The woman who spoke was sucked through a hole that appeared in the in the ceiling in a rush of air. Miles saw her hurtling skyward before the hole closed again. Clive swept back into his office and slammed the door as most of the others scrambled to leave. Only Miles and Jeff remained, looking up at the ceiling.

“She was silver rank,” Miles observed. “She’ll be fine, right?”

“The archchancellor has the landing zone fenced off so no one gets landed on. I can’t believe he had all this installed and hasn’t gotten around to an automated privacy screen.”

Anna Tilden was in the home office of her New York apartment, looking out over Central Park. She was listening to her assistant, Michael Aram, as he summarised a report.

“...confirmed to be non-synchronous. That suggests there is an intelligence behind this ‘System,’ and that this intelligence is either benevolent or sees some benefit in minimising casualties from the event.”

“But there were casualties.”

“Most are related to reactions to the event, rather than the event itself. The death toll is surprisingly low, with stress-induced heart attacks being the main culprit.”

“Small mercies. No bonus points for guessing who the intelligence behind this is. Have you formally confirmed it?”

“We’ve reached out to multiple contacts who have experienced Jason Asano’s interface. The formatting of the interface matches their recall exactly. It’s him, Ma’am.”

Anna ran her hands over her tired face.

“Remore was right,” she said. “If anything, he was understating it. When Asano comes back — and we have to assume he will now, this world is going to change. I want the transcripts of every word Remore is known to have uttered since arriving on this planet, along with the latest analysis on Boris Ketland and the Taika Williams debrief files.”

“Yes, Ma’am. And, if I may say, the world already has changed.”

“I suppose so. Everyone on Earth who’s hit puberty just got a taste of magic.”

“It’s more fundamental than that, Ma’am. This System will change the way whole sections of societies operate. As an example, the ability to accurately assess one’s own condition will change the face of medicine. A number of online diagnostic websites and alternative health organisations are assembling a class action suit against the Asano Clan.”

“It hasn’t even been a day.”

“No, Ma’am.”

“Who do they even intend to serve? The Asano Clan have been buried under vampire territory for half a decade. We don’t know if they’re alive or dead.”

“I believe they intend to serve the Japanese Asano clan, residing in Asano Village in Australia.”

“I thought they and Jason had some kind of feud.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Speaking of vampires, do we know if this affected them?”

“Not confirmed, Ma’am, although early reports suggest no. It seems that the vampires are learning that something happened to the humans from their feeding stock.”

“They’re people, Aram. Not feeding stock.”

“Sorry, Ma’am.”

“What do you think will happen with the vampires when Asano returns?”

“Analysts have produced a number of potential scenarios, Ma’am, but they are all wildly speculative due to lack of information. They’re basically saying it’s anyone’s guess.”

“Then what’s your guess? You’ve met him.”

“Ma’am, I once watched a bronze-rank Jason Asano fight a silver ranker to a no-score draw. That was two ranks ago, minimum, and before he changed how the world

works. If I were a vampire living on top of the land Asano gave his family, I'd be looking into the viability of colonising Mars."

"But Asano's power hasn't reclaimed his former territory?"

"Not as of the last report I saw, Ma'am. That came in around two hours ago."

"Alright. Go get me those materials."

"Yes, ma'am."

He turned to leave, but stopped at the door and turned around.

"Ma'am, if Asano has the power to do this to everyone in the world, why can't he restore his domains?"

"I suspect that he can. That leads me to the question of why he hasn't."