

Chapter 855

A Power That No One and Nothing Should Have

“Raythe called the Cosmic Throne the ultimate authority,” Velius said, “and with good reason. It’s a power that no one and nothing should have. The potential for damage is like no threat the cosmos could ever face.”

“Reaching transcendence requires ambition,” Raythe said. “That ambition comes in many forms and, whether selfish or altruistic, it takes a powerful drive to surpass mortality. Those with both the ambition to seek such a thing and the capability to achieve it are rarely willing to give up power. Even if they want to use it for good ends, they want to use it.”

“That’s what you want from me?” Jason asked. “To repair the Sundered Throne and then never use it?”

“Yes,” Raythe said. “We’ve been waiting for someone we believe would be willing to claim the ultimate authority, then give it up without ever exercising it. You obsess over the power you possess and the potential for abuse. The belief is that you, of all the candidates that have come and gone, are most likely to respect the damage you could do. Whether for yourself or in service of your ideals, you understand the danger in combining power and ignorance.”

“Not just never use it, then,” Jason said. “You said ‘give up the power.’ Who do you expect me to give it up to?”

“To no one,” Velius said. “The throne must be left empty. A neutral arbiter without will, only purpose.”

“As it was before the sundering,” Raythe said. “When the cosmos was in balance.”

Jason swallowed a pithy reply and made himself stop and think. He frowned, absently scratching the back of his head.

“So, you don’t want me for all the weird magic crap going on with me. I mean, you do, but you have other options in that regard. You want me for *who* I am, not *what* I am.”

“Yes,” Raythe said.

“That’s actually really flattering,” Jason said. “Thank you.”

“You agreed to do this already,” Velius said, “but you should not have answered so hastily. It warrants proper consideration.”

“No kidding, but we all know I only have time for hastily. I’ve barely got time for this conversation, and we all know I’ll agree in the end. Someone’s obviously been paying enough attention to have a good handle on me. I do have questions, though.”

“Such as?” Velius asked.

“When he was talking about changing his mind about the sundering, your boss said ‘many of us.’ Many. Not all. Who am I going to make cranky by doing this?”

“There are risks inherent to this process,” Raythe said. “And you will be opposed.”

“What risks?”

“Connecting to the Sundered Throne during your transcendence process will expose your soul to intrusion.”

“Like a star seed sticking out of the side of someone’s soul?”

“Yes,” Velius said.

“And someone is going to take that chance to intrude,” Jason said. “The opposition you mentioned. What will they be trying to do?”

“Stop you,” Raythe said. “By crushing your will.”

“Awesome. What does my will getting crushed look like, exactly?”

“If your will gets burned out,” Velius said, “the process of becoming an astral king will continue. With no sentience guiding it, though, you’ll be a small pocket universe, drifting through the astral. Eventually you will recover; give it a couple of million years and you’ll be up and about again. Probably won’t remember anything before you woke up, but you’ll be functional.”

“Yay. How does this fight play out?”

“In the process of reaching transcendence, your soul will become a liminal space. While you are connected to the throne, others can access that space. It will become a battleground, but it will still be your soul. The nature of the battle and the ground it is fought on will be for you to decide.”

“Okay. And who is it that I’m up against? Who wants to stop me?”

“The World-Phoenix prefers the current state of affairs,” Velius said. “The pact system introduced politics to the great astral beings and the World-Phoenix has navigated them to its advantage more than most. It will be your antagonist.”

“The World-Phoenix still needs me to fix the link between worlds.”

“If the throne is restored, the World-Phoenix will have less flexibility in choosing how such issues are handled in the future. It considers the throne staying sundered a significantly higher priority than keeping your worlds intact and is willing to allow contingencies to play out. Less perfect solutions, but solutions nonetheless.”

“Okay, but I’m not ready to go toe-to-toe with the World-Phoenix. Not even close, home-court advantage or no.”

“It is rare for transcendent beings to clash directly,” Raythe said. “It’s only possible when unusual circumstances create some form of battlefield, such as the one that will form

in your soul. A great astral being cannot enter your soul, even with an opening, but it can invade with an expression of its will.”

“Like an avatar?” Jason asked.

“Not exactly,” Velius said, “but close enough for practical purposes. The thing is, you get to shape those expressions of will. There are limits to what you can do with them, but you shape the battlefield, along with those who choose to enter it.”

“I think you might be overestimating me here,” Jason said. “By really quite a lot. Firstly, I’m not a transcendent being. I’m working on getting halfway there which, by definition, means I’m not there now. And even if I were, it’s not the power-oriented half I’m working on. And a clash of wills? I know how that works. I just came from clashing with a dreg of a dreg of a god’s avatar. The god wasn’t around, I was in control of the battlefield and it still nearly kicked my arse from the inside out.”

“You fought a god’s avatar?” Velius asked.

“The local god of undeath,” Raythe said. “He allowed an avatar to be drawn into the transformation zone to aid his priests. It would appear that it fought Asano and lost.”

“No,” Jason said. “That thing fought a demigod of Hero until it was running on fumes. I didn’t fight an avatar; I fought the rotting skin flake some god left behind and it still all but wiped me out of existence. And now you’re setting me up to face the World-Phoenix?”

“You will not be alone,” Velius said. “Others can access your soul to defend it, buying time for the throne to be restored.”

“You will stand with great astral beings who were against the sundering in the first place,” Raythe said. “Along with those who supported the sundering but have come to see it as a mistake. Not all of them will join, however. Some are not committed enough to a side to fight for it. Others are best kept out of such conflict.”

“You do not want the Keeper of the Sands and the All-Devouring Eye waging war in your soul,” Velius said. “Even if they are on your side.”

“So, to summarise,” Jason said, “You want to turn my soul into a cosmic war zone for entities that could wipe me out of existence with no more effort than wanting to.”

“We are asking for a battle, yes,” Raythe said. “But you underestimate what you are becoming. What you already are. Even now, you have moved beyond the stage where any entity has the power to destroy you. That body is dying because it is no longer your true body. You’re already immortal.”

Jason leaned back in his chair and let out a slow breath.

“You’re sure?”

“We cannot promise victory,” Raythe said. “Only that the fact that we were sent means there is a genuine fight to be had.”

Jason rubbed his temples. Time was passing and his headache wasn't getting any better.

“Who are the sides?” he asked. “If it was just the World-Phoenix versus the cosmic all-stars, it would be bit of a drubbing, wouldn't it?”

“As best we can tell,” Raythe told him, “only the Nameless will stand with the World-Phoenix against you.”

“The Nameless?”

“Great astral beings are entities that govern the functions of the cosmos,” Velius explained. “Life, death, time, matter. The great astral beings at the pinnacle of cosmic authority have names, but the vast majority do not. They are the functionaries of all that is; unseen yet utterly necessary.”

“They have been very happy with the removal of the Cosmic Throne's oversight,” Raythe explained. “They remain unseen as ever, yet are unbound from the strictures of their duties.”

“They were also an oversight on the part of the named great astral beings,” Velius said. “The original pacts governing great astral being behaviour after the sundering did not include the Nameless. The others saw them as nobility sees servants: furniture without will and ambition of their own.”

“The results of this mistake were not immediately apparent,” Raythe explained. “Just as the Nameless were invisible in conduct of their duties, so were they invisible in their misconduct.”

“The problems arising from the sundering became evident,” Velis said, again taking up the narrative. “The old Builder was sanctioned and the new one brought into the pacts, along with the Nameless. But this addendum to the original pacts was not an effective curb on the behaviour of these late additions. The new Builder and the Nameless have both proven flexible in their level of adherence.”

“The mistake in overlooking the Nameless may be the one with the gravest consequence,” Raythe added. “The trouble caused by the old Builder was greater than any individual problem the Nameless are responsible for. But his trouble was both visible and singular. The nameless cause lesser problems, but those problems are many. They also fester in the dark, accumulating and growing worse. The original Builder highlighted that there was a problem, but it was containable. The Nameless represent countless problems, cascading towards infinite anarchy.”

“The Builder and his one problem have been plenty for me,” Jason said. “What does infinite anarchy look like?”

“Imagine the very mechanisms of the cosmos falling apart,” Raythe said. “A cavalcade of issues as the fundamental rules of reality and beyond come apart at the seams. The Builder brought this issue into relief, but the Nameless are the ultimate threat. The danger they present is what convinced many who had supported the sundering to alter their perspective.”

“And the best idea a cosmos full of super gods came up with is to have me fix it? People say my plans are bad, but I’m amateur hour compared to this.”

“There are contingencies,” Velius said. “That is the way of great astral beings, but the contingencies are ugly. They also involve things that cannot be spoken of.”

“Suffice it to say,” Raythe added, “that your success would be the superior option by far.”

“But the World-Phoenix doesn’t agree?”

“It may believe that it can handle the Nameless, or that it can thrive in what remains after they are dealt with otherwise,” Velius said.

“What remains?” Jason asked.

“Of the cosmos. Which is as much as you’ll get from us on what will happen should you refuse or fail.”

“No pressure, then.”

“Velius speaks of the final contingency,” Raythe said. “If you do not accomplish the task, it will be asked of others like you. You are not the final line of defence for cosmic integrity. You are simply the best option we have right now.”

“I’m starting to feel extremely expendable, here. If we’ve got the World-Phoenix and the Nameless on one side, who’s joining me on team It’s Okay If Jason Dies, We’ll Find Someone Else?”

“The Celestial Book and the Seeker of Songs were both against the sundering from the start,” Raythe said. “Those who have come around and will fight are the Reaper, Legion and the Whisper in Corners. Others remain neutral or are poor choices for such a fight.”

“And they are enough to handle all of these Nameless?”

“It’s not about numbers,” Raythe said. “It’s about will. This isn’t a fight in the conventional sense.”

“That much I understand,” Jason told her. “I learned that fighting that avatar. It was my soul, my battleground, just like this will be. Once I learned to be the god of my own

universe, the avatar wasn't so hard to deal with anymore. The only trick was not losing myself while in god mode."

"The key is to anchor your identity in something," Raythe said.

"Oh, I figured that out. It was a bit touch-and-go my first go at it, but I'll know what I'm doing next time. But that doesn't mean I'm ready to face the World-Phoenix, though, even if it is in my house. Having allies is all well and good, but it will be me they're coming for, won't it? In the end, it will be my fight to win or lose."

"Yes," Raythe said. "In the end, it will be your fight."

"Then what makes you think I can win? There's a chance, sure, but that's not very reassuring. All they lose if this doesn't work is me. They can try again with the next person, and the one after that and so on. Then they've got that contingency you mentioned, even if it does suck a lot. I'm pretty sure my spending a few million years brain dead is a lot more acceptable to them than it is to me."

"Then say no," Velius said. "There will someone else eventually."

Jason sighed, already knowing he wouldn't. He turned to Raythe.

"What does Dawn have to say about her boss trying to burn the sapience out of me?" he asked her.

Raythe's mouth turned up in amused smile.

"She told the World-Phoenix not to do it," she said. "Not for your sake, or because she wants the throne restored. She told the World-Phoenix it was going to lose."

As a huge grin split Jason's face, Velius turned to look at Raythe.

"Really?" Velius asked.

"Yes," Raythe said. "I was in the World-Spark Crucible with Helsveth and witnessed the entire exchange. Dawn has a lot of faith in you, Asano. I'm not sure where it comes from, given that you've known each other all of three minutes, but you clearly made an impression."

"Young people," Velius muttered, shaking his head.

"Asano," Raythe said, "you still fall within the World-Phoenix's plans. It only pivoted to acting against you because the Sundered Throne matters more to it than the welfare of a couple of worlds."

"Yeah, I've met the back-up plan," Jason said. "Look, I get this is important and all, but I still have other things to take care of. Is there anything else I need to know before all this kicks off? How do I do the linking to the Sundered Throne bit?"

His thoughts drifted to a strange void that had appeared in his soul space.

"Never mind," he said. "I think I know that part."

“Trust your familiar; he will guide you,” Raythe said. “As for other things you should know, there is one.”

Jason looked at Raythe, the ancient being showing reluctance in her expression. She’d told him with a straight face that the World-Phoenix, arguably his most powerful ally, was going to crawl into his soul and try to scoop out his insides. After that, what would she be reluctant to tell him?

“What is it?” he asked warily.

“I left one name out when I was talking about who was going to fight alongside you,” Raythe said.

“Who?” Jason asked.

“The Builder.”

“Oh, what the fu—”