

Chapter 260

Lessons

Asano was dead but that did not have to be the end. The astral space had no god of death to guide the soul into the astral; it would have to slowly drift into the Reaper's grasp on its own. That gave the Builder a window to act.

As it considered this, Asano's combat robe vanished. A glow lit up from within his body, which started radiating heat. The Builder felt the surge of a familiar power and was filled with a fury that no mortal, even one as frustrating as Asano, could engender.

"World-Phoenix."

The Builder abandoned its vessel which fell to the ground, an abandoned puppet.

On another world, a diamond ranker stood in the throne room of an imperial palace. His name was Shako and he had pale, freckled skin, wild red hair and eyes so brightly green they almost seemed to glow. Those eyes glared down at his descendants, the imperial family sprawled on the floor in supplication. There was no sign of the arrogance that had forged an empire planet-spanning empire.

The elaborate throne of gold and ivory was empty. The emperor was on his hands knees with the rest of the family, at the feet of their ancestor. Outside, the fires of rebellion were burning the imperial city to the ground.

"Ancestor," the emperor begged, not daring to raise his eyes from the floor. "Please reawaken the guardian golems, we beg you."

Shako had not needed to draw breath for centuries, yet he did so in order to sigh at the people arrayed before him.

"When I bestowed the golems on your ancestors, you were warned," Shako said. "Their purpose was to protect the dynasty, not as a tool of conquest. If used as such, then their power would be spent in the hour of greatest need. They were a gift from Builder, for assisting him in claiming the astral spaces of this world. But this gift was a shield, not a sword."

"We were foolish," the emperor beseeched. "Please, reawaken the golems and we will only use them as you have proscribed in the future. We have learned our lesson!"

"If I did so," Shako said, "then the lesson you learn will be that you can ignore the correct path because I will step forward to correct your mistakes. Your lesson is to be found with the armies outside. It will come at the hands of a world full of essence users you oppressed with the power you were given."

“Ancestor, I do not think that any of us will survive this lesson. Our diamond-rankers have abandoned us or even turned against us. Our enemies have put up a barrier that we cannot portal out of and only the relics you left behind have allowed us to hold out this long. If you cannot save our empire, then at least save our lives. Only your might can take us away from this place to safety.”

“When I was a boy,” Shako said, “our family were not kings but farmers. We understood that the seed you plant is the crop you harvest. You have sown the seeds of discord, fury and retribution. Now the harvest has come, the yield is heavy, and there is no one to blame but yourselves.”

“Ancestor,” the emperor said, finally looking up. “Will you truly let your bloodline die?” Shako laughed coldly.

“Is that what you were relying on? That I would not let my bloodline expire? You are not my only descendants in on this world. You are merely the ones that sought to leverage our connection to aggrandise yourselves instead of accomplishing anything on your own. My blood flows all across this world, in families that have heeded my lessons and treasured my gifts, instead of squandering them in pursuit of decadence and unearned glory. Many of them are even outside, leading the charge. They do not know that their revered ancestor is the same one their oppressors have used to justify their tyranny.”

Shako spat on the floor in front of the emperor.

“You have disgraced me. Used me as a banner under which you performed atrocity after atrocity. You beg me to act but I assure you, you would have nothing but regret if I did. It would not be to save you but to scourge you, in ways even the armies baying for your blood would balk at.”

Shako’s gaze turned to the empress. Through her aura he sensed her steeling herself and she rose to her feet, raising her eyes with determination.

“Ancestor,” she pleaded. “At least take the children. They are not to blame for the sins we have committed and are still young enough to learn better. Let the rest of us die, if you must, but do not make them pay the price for the transgressions of their forebears.”

“Wife,” the emperor snarled, looking up at the empress.

“No,” she shot back. “There is no saving us, husband. Do not be blind now, at least. At the end.”

The emperor opened his mouth to speak but did not as Shako’s aura fell on him like a boulder. Shako stepped up to the empress, who matched his gaze, even as her aura wavered fearfully.

“That figures,” Shako said. “The only person to show moral responsibility is the one that married into the family. It seems that the ability to grow a spine has been weeded out of my bloodline. Very well, Empress. I will take the children, and you. It is time this family learned the lessons of being farmers once more, so farmers you shall be. Of course, there is nowhere in this world that your name is not hated. You will have to hide it, lest anyone learn whose blood you are, for they will surely spill it. You will have enough to get by, and no more. There will be those who can teach you the ways of the land. I will visit in a few generations and see how you have done.”

Shako waved his hand and the empress vanished, along with the children gathered in the back.

“Ancestor...” the emperor managed to choke out. Shako ignored him, tilting his head as if listening to something.

“I have duties,” Shako said. “You have woven your own fates and I shall intervene no more. Thank you for reminding me of the other relics I left behind, Emperor. I shall take them with me.”

Shako vanished, the hope of his descendants vanishing with him.

Physical realities existing within the astral came in vastly differing sizes. At one end of the scale were sprawling universes that spanned hundreds of billions of galaxies, existing for so long that they were, by most practical measures, eternal. At the other end were small, astral proto-spaces, flickering into being only to disappear again just hours later.

Size was largely a good determinate of how long a physical reality would last. There was, however, a physical reality that was barely the size of a small sun, yet had been in existence longer than most universes. This reality was a single, flat plane. It had no sun and no stars, containing only one thing: the city world of Interstice.

Interstice was, as far as anyone with the power to check was aware, both the oldest and largest metropolis in existence. Oceans had interlinked, artificial islands with magical batteries charged by the great waves. Mountains were hollowed out, volcanos turned into foundry cities. Intelligent species of every stripe could be found, in jungles dotted with grand ziggurats, connected by magical skyways passing over the trees. Underwater cities connected by glass tunnels, with magical subways running not just on the floor but on the walls and ceilings of the tunnels as well.

There was no sun, yet there were days. No moon, yet there were tides. Climate affected not just weather but gravity. It was a realm of impossibilities that some called the capital city of the cosmos.

There were administrators in Interstice, but no rulers. When the great astral beings had business in a physical reality, this was the physical reality they used. In the face of that, who would be so bold as to claim to be anything but a caretaker? It was a place where the most powerful mortals in existence vied for the chance to be servants.

One of the many city-regions of Interstice was the island Glim. An artificial island, it defied the equatorial heat of its location to be made almost entirely of ice. The ground and buildings were all crafted from ice stained in rainbow colours, extending high above and deep below the surface of the water. The magical ice did not chill the bones and did not melt. The only cold it radiated was just enough to cool the tropical heat to a pleasant warmth.

Shako arrived via dimensional teleportation in the submarine bowels of the city, deep below the surface. He appeared in one of several portal squares that existed for the purpose. The local authorities noted arrivals and made various checks before allowing them into the city proper.

Portalling into just any region of Interstice was frowned upon and magically obstructed. Shako was powerful enough to circumvent such measures but had no reason to do so. He flew into the air toward a shaft in the ceiling, stopping at the checkpoint building affixed to the ceiling.

As he was a resident, a diamond-ranker and a favoured servant of the Builder, the civil authorities did little more than note Shako's arrival as he passed through the checkpoint. They delayed him no more than required to give a respectful welcome before he flew into the shaft and toward the surface. Emerging into open sky, Shako flew up and over the city. Glim's buildings of colourful, shimmering ice were a kaleidoscope under the clear blue sky.

At the very heart of Glim, as was the case with many city-regions, were the districts claimed by the great astral beings. The great astral beings could no more visit Interstice than they could any other physical reality, with their servants and agents being the ones to occupy the space. Each astral being that wanted one had their own territory, with the districts forming a ring around a shared communal district in the middle.

The Builder's district had the most varied and outlandish building designs as the Builder was not to be outdone on architecture. Shako had the finest residence in the Builder's district, making it one of the most impressive, if least subtle homes in the entirety of Interstice.

Shako did not head for home, instead heading for the border where the communal district met the Reaper's district. The Reaper's territory was marked by buildings whose ice was shaped and shaded like dark glass to look like towers of delicately-carved obsidian.

He alighted on the ground at the border of the Reaper's territory and went into a large, dark building. In the atrium, blue light shone through windows of ice, lighting up the dark, glassy walls. People moved out of his way as he moved to the man sitting behind a desk.

"Master Shako, sir," the man greeted.

"The Builder wishes to speak," Shako told him.

"The Reaper has anticipated this, Master Shako. Master Velius is waiting in the dome chamber."

Shako raised an eyebrow, but did not enquire further.

"Thank you," he said, and rose up into the air.

There were elevating platforms but Shako flew directly up and into a shaft in the high ceiling. There were magical barriers between each floor of the building but they vanished to admit Shako as he ascended all the way to the top. The shaft opened into a room that took up the entire top floor of the building, covering a dome of glassy ice. It was a pleasant lounge area with rich but understated décor. More used to the Builder's indulgent opulence than the Reaper's preference minimalism, Shako found it rather plain. A man got out of a chair to greet him, offering him a friendly smile and a hand to shake.

"Velius," Shako greeted warmly. "It's been too long."

"It has," Velius agreed. He was a tall celestine, with dark skin and a bushy mound of curly, silver hair that matched his eyes. "You've been back to your home, right? Are your family still ruling that world you're from?"

"For the moment," Shako said. "And I do mean moment. There's a horde at the gate situation."

"Ah. They took something you gave them and got carried away?" Velius asked.

"Exactly."

Velius nodded sympathetically as he waved Shako into a comfortable lounge chair before sitting back down himself.

"I had similar problems," he said. "It's almost a rite of passage for diamond-rankers. Did you decide to help them out or leave them to their fate?"

"They needed a lesson they were not going to get from me."

"Very wise," Velius said. "I made the mistake of getting my descendents out of trouble again and again. That just made them worse and worse every time, until I just had to wash

my hands of them entirely. I check on them every century or so, now, to see if any of them are still around. They were purged pretty thoroughly once I withdrew my protection.”

“I decided to protect the children,” Shako said. “Take them away, get a fresh start. Humble beginnings.”

“That’s a good idea,” Velius said. “You know, we should write a book. A guide to the newly diamond-rank. A lot of them have never even left their own worlds before. I was like that and could have really used the advice. We could get together with some of the others, make a list of all the things we did wrong.”

“Not a bad idea,” Shako said. “I know a couple of…”

He broke off mid-sentence.

“It’s time,” he said. Velius nodded and both their auras underwent a change as their respective great astral beings inhabited them.

“I know why you’ve come,” the Reaper said through Velius. The rich, warm tone of Velius’ voice became cold and bleak as it spoke the Reaper’s words. “The answer is no.”

“Asano is dead. He should stay dead.”

Shako’s voice was heavy but clipped as the Builder spoke through him.

“I agree,” the Reaper said, “but he carried the World-Phoenix’s token. Those pacts are older than you and I will not violate them for your childish indulgence.”

“I am not a child,” the Builder said.

“Are you not?” the Reaper asked. “You play around in mortal affairs like a child with toys. You have not been mortal for so very long, now. The rest of us grow tired of waiting for you to realise that and act with decorum appropriate to your station.”

“What is the point of being what we are if we allow ourselves to be bound by petty rules?”

“We are the rules,” the Reaper said. “To deny them is to deny ourselves.”

“We could be so much more,” the Builder said.

“More?” the Reaper asked. “You have built a world that you might play god, when being a god is so far beneath you.”

“Gods belong to one, meagre planet, which they share,” the Builder said. “I will be worshipped by an entire universe. I will be great astral being and god both, becoming more than either. A god beyond gods.”

“Good luck with that,” a female voice came drifting through the room, accompanied by the arrival of a potent presence. The World-Phoenix’s vessel was also a celestine, like the Reaper’s, but with alabaster skin and ruby hair. Her expression more alive than the blank

faces of the other vessel's, with a teasing smile and an amused twinkle in her red, gemstone eyes.

"World-Phoenix," the Builder said. "Why are you here?"

"I requested her attendance," the Reaper said. "I wish to settle things now before you make foolish decision that will force the hand of the rest of us."

"Your unbecoming obsession with mortal concerns is beneath us," the World-Phoenix said as she joined the others in sitting down.

"You are the one who gave Asano a token. He's your outworlder."

"I did not make Asano an outworlder," the World-Phoenix said. "That was happenstance. I simply gave him a gift as his soul passed through the astral."

"This is the correct way to intercede in mortal affairs," the Reaper told the Builder. "If you want a tree, plant a seed. Do not send an army to transplant it for you."

"How I conduct my affairs is my business," the Builder said.

"Yet you came here to ask the Reaper to interfere in mine," the World-Phoenix said.

"The dead are his concern," the Builder said. "What right have you to claim them?"

"And the integrity of dimensions is mine," the World-Phoenix said. "Remember that it is only with my permission that you can conduct your little game, and remember well the conditions I have placed upon it."

"I remember," the Builder said.

"Do you?" the World-Phoenix asked. "You have already pushed things to the limits of my tolerance. Gods are beings of singular planets, yet you gave one the means to interfere with not just another world, but another reality. I only stepped in because you have pushed conditions to the breaking point. Your divine accomplice has made a mistake that threatens to blow a giant hole in the side of a physical reality, taking an entire planet with it. That, in turn, could threaten the integrity of the reality as a whole. An entire universe, not even fourteen billion years old. I provide someone with an actual chance to rectify the situation and not only do you not thank me, but you come here and try to stop him?"

"You really think Asano can accomplish anything?" the Builder asked.

"He stopped you," the World-Phoenix said. "He's becoming a pleasantly effective little seedling."

"He didn't stop me. That was the ritualist."

"It was, wasn't it? The Celestial Book wanted me to remind you about proportionality, by the way. The ritualist is one of his, and one that he has high hopes for. He will not tolerate you sending some gold-ranker to kill the boy out of spite."

“I’m not so petty as that,” the Builder said and the World-Phoenix laughed. Even the impassive face of the Reaper was tinged with scepticism.

“You are literally here because you want revenge against one mortal,” the World-Phoenix said. “You were not raised up from mortality yourself in order to reign over those you left behind. You need to turn your attention to the higher concerns for which you were brought up to attend.”

“I was not raised up,” the Builder said. “I took this power for myself.”

The World-Phoenix and the Reaper shared a glance.

“Of course you were,” the World-Phoenix said.

“I asked the World-Phoenix here to discuss a compromise,” the Reaper said.

“Why bother?” the World-Phoenix asked. “We both know that he won’t learn until he crosses a line and faces the consequences.”

“I think we can all agree it would be better if it did not come to that,” the Reaper said. “I have terms that may not please either of you, but should, at least, be tolerable.”

“Speak your terms, then,” the Builder said.

“Builder,” the Reaper said, “you will be forbidden from interference of any kind with Asano’s birth world. You will send no people, recruit no followers and produce neither star seeds nor tokens.”

“That is no concession,” the World-Phoenix said. “Asano’s world is unstable enough. He already knows that if he intervenes further I will intervene far more directly.”

“A price, at this point, he might be willing to pay,” the Reaper said. “This will be a formal pact, with all the consequences of breaking it that would entail. Further, his intercession in the other world will be curtailed.”

“I already have plans in motion,” the Builder said. “You have no right to interfere.”

“And you shall not be restricted from carrying them out,” the Reaper said. “But no new star seeds, no new tokens, and no more vessels. You will withdraw from your existing vessels and unmake all the unused seeds and tokens. That means the world itself, along with any attached astral spaces.”

“That’s barely a concession either,” the World-Phoenix said. “He has already made star seeds fall onto that world like rain drops. His invasion will not need more of them.”

“What do I get for these concessions?” the Builder asked.

“The World-Phoenix will offer Asano a power. It will aid him in the task ahead, but at a cost: No more resurrections. No force shall return him from the dead again. Not his soul entering a physical reality as an outworlder or any other force. When he dies, he dies.”

“If he reaches the upper ranks,” the World-Phoenix said, “that would leave him vulnerable compared to other essence users who could be brought back with gold and diamond-ranked essence magic. The power I offered in return would have to be formidable to be worth the trade. It would also be incumbent upon him to accept it. Even we cannot reshape a soul without permission.”

“It can be powerful, but only in such that it is a tool for completing the task that lays before him,” the Reaper said.

“It’s not enough,” the World-Phoenix said. “You wish me to trim my own tree and credit the Builder for trimming he has already finished?”

“I will make a concession as well,” the Reaper said.

“Why?” the World-Phoenix asked. “What concern is any of this to you?”

“Asano has died twice already. It concerns me that you would find a way to bring him back again and again until you are done with him. If you make him an outworlder countless times over, you make a farce of my role.”

“I’m not the Builder,” the World-Phoenix said. “I do not play callous games with the rules.”

“I also have some gratitude to Asano,” the Reaper said. “He and his companions gave final release to a number of souls that had been trapped. Many of them were my people. I am not opposed to helping him face the challenges ahead.”

“Favouritism,” the Builder said. “Asano has one of your shadows chasing him around.”

The Reaper gave a brief, fatherly smile.

“Of all my children, Shade has ever followed his own path.”

“What is this concession you’ll make?” the World-Phoenix asked the Reaper.

“Asano is going to need a companion he can trust for the tasks ahead. Where he is going there will be those that have his trust and those that have the knowledge and power to help him. There will not be anyone with both of things, but I can provide such a person.”

The World-Phoenix narrowed her eyes. “You’re talking about another outworlder.”

“Yes.”

“How is that acceptable?” the Builder asked. “I came here asking you to leave a soul where it belongs, and not only do you refuse me, but offer to take another one out?”

“Yes,” the Reaper said.

“Why would I agree to any of this?” the Builder asked.

“Because the next time you kill Asano,” the Reaper said, “he will stay dead.”

“Still not enough,” the World-Phoenix said. “This outworlder. I’ll agree if we bestow blessings to evolve her racial gifts. All her racial gifts.”

“Each of us can only advance one power,” the Reaper said.

“Which the three of us will,” the World-Phoenix said. “We also convince three more to do the same.”

“That’s outrageous,” the Builder said. “Why would I participate in this?”

“To demonstrate to the others that you are anything more than a selfish child in dire need of being admonished,” the Reaper said. “Do not forget how your position amongst our number became available.”

The Builder looked at the Reaper for a long time before speaking.

“Very well,” the Builder said finally. “I agree to the terms.”

“As do I,” the World-Phoenix said. “I will remind you again, Builder, that Asano’s world is already off-limits to you.”

“I know.”

“See that you remember,” the Reaper said. “If you violate the World-Phoenix’s conditions, you will be censured.”

“I said that I know.”

“You are known for saying one thing and doing another,” the Reaper said. “It’s very mortal of you.”