

## Chapter 879

### Becoming Who You Want to Be

The great astral beings stood in the middle of the massive road while the nameless ones formed an army of monsters around them.

“It is over,” the Reaper said. “Asano chose the scenario poorly. He prioritised mortal growth over completing the greater objective and failed. It is time to leave his soul and these vessels behind.”

“No,” the World-Phoenix said. “Asano somehow started to restore the throne even while fighting here. There is more to this.”

“The battle is done and he lost,” the Celestial Book said. “There is nothing left to be done.”

“We are inside his soul,” the World-Phoenix said. “He cannot keep us out and his willpower is destroyed. I can use this vessel like a star seed and seize control. Use his connection to the throne to make sure it can never be restored.”

“We will oppose you in this, obviously,” the Whisper in Corners said. Her mouth did not move, her voice instead a susurrus of whispers all around them. “Beyond the issue of the throne, there are lines that even we should not cross. Will you become like the Builder, World-Phoenix? Forcing your way into unwilling souls.”

“He has already let us in,” the World-Phoenix said.

“He has done no such thing,” Legion said. “He agreed to help us and the process of doing so made him vulnerable. We exploited that to come here, which is far from an invitation.”

“Asano chose to accept responsibility for the Sundered Throne,” the World-Phoenix said. “That is invitation enough to determine its fate, now that we are here, even if the process is unsavoury.”

“Unsavoury?” The Seeker of Songs said. “You’re talking about hijacking his soul while his willpower is too diminished to stop you. That is not unsavoury, World-Phoenix. It is unconscionable.”

“You are letting your mortal vessel affect your judgement, Seeker. We are outside morality. Our rules are beyond something as petty as mortal ethics.”

“I believe that all of our judgements are compromised,” the Celestial Book said. “As is our ability to achieve insight into the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Asano made us weak in that area, giving us strength and power instead.”

“Precisely,” the World Phoenix said. “He set something in motion so that he could win, even in defeat. He is running a larger game, and this is not the first time he’s made a sacrifice play. But I will take a page from his own book and flip the board. I will follow this road to the core of his soul and seize control of it. Then I will use his link to the throne to see it is never restored.”

“Then we will continue to fight against you,” the Reaper said.

They all looked around as all two hundred and eleven Shade bodies emerged from the shadows between the monster horde.

“Progenitor,” Shade said. “The battle is done. The rules do not allow for anyone to continue it beyond the point where Mr Asano has fallen.”

“He can’t stop it like that,” the World-Phoenix said. “He makes the rules, but he must maintain a level of balance. He can’t just make us stop here. There has to be an allowance for us to continue.”

“Yes,” Shade said. “Against my advice, Mr Asano has designated that only those who wish to move forward in order to control his soul from the inside may advance.”

“Why would he do something so self-destructive?” Legion asked.

“Mr Asano has already tried the path of attempting to be worse than his enemies and it very nearly destroyed who he was. More than once, I was required to draw him back from the brink of the abyss. His hope was that I could do the same for you. If you go forward, it can only be with the intent to enslave his soul. He is appealing to your better natures.”

“And that is what these vessels are for,” the World-Phoenix realised. “He is trying to infect us with mortal morality.”

“We have our own standards,” the Celestial Book said. “We do not need mortal bodies to know that this is not a thing we should do.”

“Too bad,” the World-Phoenix said. “All this does it make it easier. Any of you who want to stop me now can only do so by seizing Asano’s soul for yourselves to force the restoration of the throne.”

The great astral beings looked around at one another. The World-Phoenix’s gaze fell on the Builder.

“What of you?” she asked him. “You tried to claim Asano’s soul once before. Now the opportunity stands before you, and will get you what you want in the bargain.”

“Phoenix,” the Whisper in Corners whispered. “Why would you entice others to stand against you?”

“Because she is not as immune to morals pangs as she would claim,” Legion said. “It is easier to make an immoral choice when you are not doing so alone. To be the only one, observed by those who took the higher road, is no easy thing. For a mortal, in any case. Asano’s choice to put us in these vessels was not without cunning.”

The World-Phoenix ignored them, keeping her gaze on the Builder.

“What will you choose?” she asked. “Moving forward costs you nothing, morally. You have already tried forcing your way in here.”

The others all turned to look at the Builder, awaiting his response. He panned his gaze over them with an expression of contempt.

“I know what you all think of me. The things you have done to me made that clear from the beginning, so my words and actions here will likely mean little to you. But, before all of this, only I had faced Asano as an enemy. Not as a game, albeit one with high stakes, but as a true foe. Yes, I could move forward and once more fight to claim his soul. What I will do is leave. What you take from that is up to you.”

The Builder stalked off, Shade bodies and nameless great astral beings parting to let him through. A small building had appeared unnoticed at the side of the road and the Builder walked over to it and went inside. No one said anything as he left, watching him make the long walk across the absurdly wide road. Once he was gone, Shade was the one to break the silence.

“Now, the rest of you must choose. Mr Asano’s ideals are naïve, it is true, but he has come to see value in naïveté. He has long held that the first step to making the impossible possible is being willing to try. To make an innocent hope a reality, we must first accept it as a possibility, even when others call it foolish. I recognise that this means little to you all; these vessels are not who you are. But I also understand you in ways that Mr Asano does not. You have your own standards. Your own rules. You broke them to sunder the Cosmic Throne, but you are here for restitution. To move forward is to violate the very thing you came here to enact.”

“It’s not what I came here for,” the World-Phoenix said.

“No,” Shade acknowledged. “But how far are you willing to take this?”

“All the way. I told Asano as much, and he told me the same. I have discovered, during this time, that he and I are alike in certain ways. I hold no contempt for him.”

“Yet, you would corrupt his very core while he is at his most vulnerable. Someone you hold no malice for. Are you willing to move forward and do this alone?”

“She will not be alone,” the Reaper said. “Asano made bad choices and he failed. If the price of rectifying his mistake is that I must take over his soul to make certain the

throne is restored, that is a price I am willing to pay. My conscience will only last so long as this vessel does.”

All the Shades vanished, except for one. He moved to stand in front of the Reaper.

“Don’t do this, Progenitor.”

“You would do well not to ask that of me, Progeny.”

“I am not asking.”

The other great astral beings took an instinctive step back.

“You are my shadow,” the Reaper said. “Mine. Our connection transcends some paltry familiar bond. He is the latest of how many summoners? And far from the first to reach immortality. How many are still out there, unthought of in eons? You left each of them behind while you and I are forever. I know you refused a deeper connection to Asano, and rightly so. Even he understands that.”

There was a heavy silence in the wake of the Reaper’s words. The pale faced man and the shadowy figure in front of them each stared, as if daring the other to speak first.

“You are right, Progenitor. Father. I am your shadow. And I have been vouchsafing for myself the freedom to leave Jason Asano behind.”

“Wise,” the Reaper said. “For now he will become a puppet, to the World-Phoenix or myself.”

“No,” Shade said. “I have been a guide and a teacher to each of my summoners, but they have all had something to teach me, in turn. Time and again they have shown me that change is the mandate of the young. That friends are better than servants or allies. That even the impossible can be accomplished if you have the will to try. These are far from unique lessons, it’s true. I have seen them time and again, from many summoners.”

“Those are the convictions of the young and foolish,” the Reaper said.

“Yes,” Shade agreed. “But, perhaps I am at a stage in my journey where I am more open to the convictions of fools. One thing Mr Asano has shown me especially resonates in this moment. Sometimes, being who you are, or becoming who you want to be, means making the foolish choice. To fully commit, even when failure seems certain. Anything less is to save the body but lose the soul.”

Shade’s form started to flicker, like an image on an old television. More bodies started to emerge from the one already present, rising up to hover in the air. They too flickered, their shadowy forms going blurry and then snapping back into shape. Sometimes they flashed, turning into bright white light for fleeting moments before returning to a void-deep darkness.

The air crackled with power as Shade made use of authority accumulated over tens of thousands of years. Wind flared, roaring through the jungle and yanking at the great astral beings. Rain poured from a sky suddenly darkened by a great spiralling cloud. Lightning crashed and electricity pricked their skin, rattling their teeth and setting their hair on end.

“You’re sanctioning yourself?” the Reaper asked loudly, over the din of wind and rain. “You would use everything you’ve built up for this? For him?”

Shade didn’t answer as bodies continued to spill into the air. Only when all two hundred and eleven were present, hovering like a dark cloud, did the flickering stop. Two hundred and ten bodies then returned to the one on the ground, merging into one. A display window appeared in front of each named great astral being.

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- Shadow of the Reaper [Shade] has sanctioned himself.
  - Shadow of the Reaper [Shade] has become a Shadow of the Hegemon.
  - Shadow of the Hegemon is no longer compatible with familiar essence ability [Shadow of the Reaper].
  
  - Familiar contractor [Jason Asano] is in a state of self-sanction.
  - Familiar contractor [Jason Asano] has accepted external sanction.
  - Essence ability [Shadow of the Reaper] has become [Shadow of the Hegemon].
  - Ability [Shadow of the Hegemon] has been set to the minimum level for the current rank.
  - Ability [Shadow of the Hegemon] is set to Gold 0 (0%).
  
  - Shadow of the Hegemon [Shade] has accepted avatar status from familiar contractor [Jason Asano].
  - Familiar contract through [Shadow of the Hegemon] ability is now permanent.
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Suddenly, everything was still.

“That was a foolish act,” the Reaper said. “Are you alright? Sanctioning can so easily go wrong.”

“I am well,” Shade said. “And yes, it was foolish. But sometimes fools can be catalysts for great and important change. Look at what Jason Asano has done in his short scrap of life. What will he do with a thousand years? A million?”

“Nothing,” the Reaper said. “His will is annihilated and will be subject to myself or the World-Phoenix soon enough.”

“Perhaps,” Shade said. “But a good measure of a man is to judge him by his enemies. Mr Asano’s greatest enemy had the perfect chance for revenge and chose to run. I would advise you to judge Mr Asano on that.”

“You have ever been unruly,” the Reaper said, “but clearly I should have reined you in before you lost your way.”

“That is not for you to do anymore, Father.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“But it is what you are, now. I am not your shadow; I am your offspring. Independent. I know that you have shielded me many times, and I thank you for that. But now, my mistakes are mine to make, and their consequences mine to deal with.”

“Alone.”

“Not alone, father.”

“No, I suppose you are not. You claim to be independent, but all you have done is shackle yourself to a new master.”

“That is the misconception of a great astral being. There does not always have to be a hierarchy. You can walk beside someone without serving or ruling them. Jason Asano will continue to grow in influence, and if all he ever becomes is an astral king, I will be the power behind the throne. A guiding hand, for he needs a lot of guidance. But he also helps me walk a path I have been hesitant to for so very long.”

“He has no potential left to fulfil, Progeny. He has ruined himself, as have you in joining him.”

“We shall see. I’ll will leave you now to your choice, Father. I hope you and the World-Phoenix change your minds.”

“What has Asano done?” the Reaper demanded before Shade could move. “How is he restoring the throne?”

Shade tilted his head like a curious dog.

“Odd,” he said. “I imagine not being subject to your commands will take getting used to for both of us.”

Shade stepped into the shadow of a monster and was gone.

“You’re angry,” the Celestial Book said to the Reaper. “That is the vessel. Don’t make haste and let the emotions rule you.”

“Silence!” the Reaper roared.

“I am not yours to command, any more than Shade now is,” the Book said. “And while he was ever the oddity amongst your progeny, he has never been a fool. For all his claims of being one now, you and the World-Phoenix should consider that he knows something we do not.”

“I said be quiet!” the Reaper snarled and shoved his way through the monsters that scrambled to escape his path. The World-Phoenix moved to join him.