

Chapter 881

The One You Feed

The World-Phoenix and the Reaper walked down the road leading into the caldera valley. The whole mountain range was a melange of geographical quirks that, individually, would be highly irregular. While not as high as the peaks framing it, it was odd to have a valley so far above sea level. An expansive caldera valley was also unusual, but far from unheard of. Jason had family on his mother's side who lived in such an area.

Along with the valley having its own temperate microclimate, the air was not as thin as it should have been for the altitude. Then there were the hot springs scattered through the forest, steam visibly rising from them. Taken all together, the features of the region showed off its otherworldly nature. That, or Jason's deficit of knowledge regarding geography, geology and climate science.

The icy winds of the high mountains gave way to mild, pleasant breezes as the great astral beings moved downslope. At the point where the barren mountainside met the tree line, they knew their journey was over. The road continued on, but not for them. They had reached the soul of the tree city and it would not admit them.

After being accompanied only by the sound of the wind, a new noise reached their ears from within the forest. The source was revealed when Jason Asano meandered into view along a woodland trail, watching a video on the phone in his hand. His other hand held a half-eaten sandwich.

The unsealed trail joined with the road that continued into the forest. Only when Jason reached the road did he look up at the great astral beings standing at the tree line. He looked at them contemplatively as he took a bite from his sandwich and chewed on it.

"How?" the World-Phoenix asked.

"Right on time," he said as he sauntered towards them. "It's almost like this was all part of an elaborate and well-orchestrated plan that was pulled off in spite of people being generally derogatory as regarding the efficacy of my ability to plot and execute a scheme."

He arrived in front of the pair and paused the video.

"Sorry about that," he said. "I'm watching an old boxing match. I'm not normally a sports guy, which is not very Australian of me, I know. Especially when I was named after a footy player. This boxing match, though, it's an interesting story. They called it the Rumble in the Jungle."

Emi sat cross-legged on a rooftop in the astral space city. Nine cubes floated around her in an orbit. The cubes were forged from a shimmering dark metal only found in the outermost reaches of the astral space. Each face of each cube was divided into nine sections, each bearing a different glowing rune. The cubes could rotate each row and column to change the configuration of the runes.

“Hey Asano. How do you solve it if the colours keep changing?”

At silver rank, Emi was past the need to breathe. Even so, she took a long, slow breath to contain her temper.

“I’ve told you so many times, Vincent. They are not Rubik’s cubes.”

“Yeah, they’ve got those glowing bits instead of the flat colours. Do you want me to get you some stickers to put on them? A print shop opened up a couple of months ago that could probably do them.”

Emi turned to look at the young man standing in the doorway to the stairwell. His face was blank and his aura control was solid. As usual, she couldn’t tell if he was teasing her or genuinely dense.

“What are you doing up here?” she asked.

“Your mother has just pulled a tray of savoury scones from the oven.”

“Well you should have started with that. I’ll be down in a minute.”

He grinned before turning to head back down the stairs. The cubes flew towards Emi and stowed themselves in her satchel. She was organising them a little better in her bag when she felt herself being watched and froze. After years of having aura senses, it was unnerving to feel nothing from them while still instinctively recognising a presence. She slowly stood and turned to see her uncle sitting on the short brick wall at the edge of the roof.

“You and I look almost the same age now,” he said, his voice tinged with sadness. After staring wide-eyed for a moment, she flung herself forward to wrap him in a hug.

“Why do you feel like you’re made out of rubber?” she asked.

“This is just an avatar, Moppet. It’s going to be a little bit longer before I can see you in person. I’ll tell you all about it when I get there for real.”

She drew back, looking him up and down.

“Your eyes aren’t strange.”

“Neither are yours.”

“You look even more like Uncle Kaito.”

“Gold rank. It spruces you up.”

“The Domains—”

"I'm not here talk about any of that. I'm here to see you. I know I wasn't in the best place, the last time we saw each other. I know I've been gone a long time, and missed one of the most important parts of your life. Time when you could have really used the terrible advice of a shady uncle."

They both laughed. They both had wet eyes.

"There's no making up for not having been there," he said. "But I'll be there soon."

"Have you seen Great Grandmother yet?"

"No. This is my first chance to reach out and I wanted to look in on you properly. I wasn't able to project like this before, but I'm very close to done and I don't have to hide anymore."

"Hide from what?"

"I've been running a rope-a-dope on some entities that watch the whole cosmos, so information control had to be the priority."

Emi looked at him with suspicion.

"What's a rope-a-dope?" she asked. "Is that a sex thing?"

"No! It's not a sex thing."

"It sounds like a sex thing."

"It's a very famous thing that isn't related to sex at all. Does it involve very fit, topless, sweaty men in shorts? Yes, it does. But that doesn't make it a sex thing."

"Topless, sweaty men you say?" Emi asked, sounding intrigued.

"Oh, no," Jason said, wagging a finger at her. "I do not approve of this whole 'adult' thing you've got going on. Where's my precious little niece?"

Emi's expression went cold and Jason winced, knowing he'd made a mistake.

"She spent half her life waiting for her uncle to come back," Emi said.

Jason nodded and bowed his head.

"I didn't want to stay away for so long," he said, his voice almost a whisper.

Emi's expression softened and she moved to hug him again.

"I know," she said. "Some of it, anyway. What Rufus told me. Doesn't mean I have to like it."

"No. No, it doesn't."

He tousled her hair and she shoved herself off of him.

"You know I always hated that. And now I'm an adult, Uncle Jason."

"Which I still don't approve of."

He tilted his head, as if trying to hear a distant sound.

"What is it?" Emi asked.

"This is my first time holding simultaneous conversations in different universes. I'm talking to the Grim Reaper and a cosmic phoenix right now."

"About what?"

"Boxing."

"Boxing?"

"You asked. Look, I'll be there for real when I can be. No promises, but not too long, now. I'll grab my friends in the other universe and bring them for a visit. Some things are going to happen before I get there, though. Tell your grandmother that once the domains are back in place, she doesn't have to worry about them fading anymore."

"She's going to have a lot of questions."

"Yep. Sorry about that. But I'm not here for her. I want you to know that even though I couldn't be here, I have been watching."

"You have?"

"I have."

She narrowed her eyes.

"How closely?"

Jason chuckled and looked at the empty doorway to the stairs. The one Vincent had left through, right before Jason's arrival. Emi followed his gaze and then looked back at him.

"What?" she asked.

"He's cute."

"No he's not! I mean, who? I mean... shut up!"

Jason let out a belly laugh as his niece turned red.

"You should get to those savoury scones, Moppet. Paying attention to things in different universes is something I'm still getting used to, and I need to concentrate on the other thing. I just wanted to check in, now that I finally had the chance. I love you, and I'll see you soon."

Then he was gone and she was alone on a roof that suddenly felt very empty.

"A boxing match is like a duel," Jason explained. "And the Rumble in the Jungle was one of the most famous ones ever. There was this one guy. He had a mouth on him; problems with authority. The other guy had power. He was the one everyone thought was going to win."

"There is no point to this," the Reaper interrupted. "You need to—"

“You need to shut your damn mouth!” Jason snarled, his affable demeanour replaced with spitting savagery in an instant. “You two are new to mortality, so you don’t understand what it cost me to be dragged into your little game. Well, the game is over and I won. So, you are going to stand there and listen to my Bond villain speech, Reaper, or I will use the cosmic throne to give everyone in the universe ten free resurrections, do you hear me?”

The Reaper stared at him for a long time before giving a curt nod. As soon as he did, Jason was all smiles again, as if his spittle-tossing rage had never happened.

“Now,” Jason said. “Where was I? Right, the guy with the power and the guy with the mouth. You see, everyone thought the guy with the power was going to win. That the guy with the mouth couldn’t take the beating he was going to get. Except that he did. He took it and he took it, and the whole time, he was setting the other guy up to lose. Hard. Which he did, and he wasn’t happy about it. It took him a long time to accept that he just got beat. By the greatest there ever was.”

“You think you’re the greatest there ever was?” the World-Phoenix asked.

“No,” Jason said. “I’m not Muhammad Ali, so I had to cheat. I don’t have to tell you that splitting your willpower is a basic skill of a transcendent. You’re doing it with those vessels you’re in right now. I’ve been doing sort of a ‘baby’s first willpower segmentation’ with my avatars for a while now. I’ve never tried to fully seat my consciousness in multiple places before, though. Not until this. And doing it slice by slice was a *huge* regret. I haven’t felt pain like that since the Builder tried to make me cough up my soul. Kind of necessary for the ruse, sadly.”

“When you were losing willpower,” the World-Phoenix said, “You were never really losing it. You were siphoning it off into this nested soul where we couldn’t sense it. Using it to work on restoring the throne while the rest of you was fighting us.”

“That’s pretty much it,” Jason said. “Embezzling my own soul. As you said, the game was rigged from the start. You lost the moment you agreed to participate. Making that happen is why I set everything up the way I did. “

“You fooled us,” the Reaper said. “Even your own allies.”

“I don’t like allies,” Jason said. “They are using you, inherently. If they think it’s worth it, they’ll turn on you in a second. Some are even depraved enough to betray you so completely they would enslave your soul to get what they want.”

“I will not apologise,” the Reaper said.

“I wouldn’t expect you to,” Jason said. “That’s kind of my whole point. So, yes. I played you all, enemies and allies both. But I couldn’t do everything the way I wanted. There’s only so much influence I can have on great astral beings, even if it’s just fragments

of their willpower I'm dealing with. Even in my own soul. But I also had some cards up my sleeve. I knew that you wouldn't know about the soul inside my soul. And I knew how much you rely on your prime vessels when thinking on a mortal scale."

"You gave us mortal shells with the strengths and weaknesses you needed us to have," the World-Phoenix said. "To make us easier to deceive."

"Exactly. If you were using your actual prime vessels, with their years of experience, they would have realised that I was pulling a shifty. They wouldn't have just gone along with the program, and I needed you to play the game on my terms. I put you into mortal vessels that were young, dumb and full of power. All that strength was to balance key deficits in your reasoning and judgement. Not so naïve as to make it obvious, but just enough to exploit the natural arrogance of beings unused to having any limits at all."

"If you are explaining this now," the Reaper said, "it means that you are done. You are ready to take the final step, completing your passage to astral king and the restoration of the cosmic throne."

"Yeah," Jason said.

"Why bother telling us all this?" the World-Phoenix asked. "What does revealing your plans now get you? The chance to gloat? To give one of the little speeches that you love?"

"I won't deny the appeal of explaining my evil scheme," Jason said. "And it's a little hurtful that everyone makes fun of my plans, so I wanted people to see how well this one went. If either of you runs into my team, please tell them about this."

"I'm not going to do that," the World-Phoenix said.

"I will see them when they die," the Reaper pointed out.

Jason shook his head.

"The real reason we're talking here," he said, "is that I gave you both a choice. For you, Phoenix, to accept the loss, and the Reaper to accept the win. Instead, you both chose to come in here, looking to strip mine the joint. But you only got into my soul in the first place because the gate was jammed open while I repaired the throne. And now, I'm done. I can swing the gate shut before you can withdraw your strands of willpower from those vessels. And without a star seed to let you slip through the soul barrier, any willpower that's in here will stay here. Cut off from the rest of you. That will leave me free to refine it down into authority that I will very much be in need of as a newly minted astral king. Not a quick or easy process, but I have a long, long time."

"You baited us here to consume us," the Reaper said.

"I baited nothing. I tried to get you to stay away. Your own son—"

"Don't you talk about him! You took him from me."

“You didn’t lose me,” Shade said, emerging from Jason’s shadow. “Every child must make their own way in the world, sooner or later. It does not stop the father from being the father or the son from being the son.”

“Your drama doesn’t matter,” the World-Phoenix told the Reaper. “These vessels and their emotions won’t matter when Asano drags the willpower out of them and refines it. There aren’t a lot of way to genuine hurt our kind, Asano. I have to congratulate you on finding one of the few.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. He looked to Shade and then the Reaper.

“Alright, you two,” he told the great astral beings. “Sod off.”

“You’re letting us go?” the Reaper asked.

“Yeah.”

“Why?” the World-Phoenix asked. “We came here to enslave your soul.”

“It’s not about you. My father once told me that when I’m in situations like this, the real choice is whether I want to be the person who was ruthless or the person who showed mercy. So, you two came here to do something truly heinous. And I chose to forgive you.”

“We are not yours to judge,” the Reaper said.

“I explained this once already, Reaper; it’s not about you. Now, go and wait until I restore the throne. I assume you’ll want to be there.”

“Yes,” the World-Phoenix said. “For what it’s worth, Asano, I find myself glad that I failed to enslave your soul, even as I hate that failure means you will restore the throne.”

Jason nodded.

“We all make mistakes,” he said. “Sometimes terrible ones. You were lucky, this time, in that no damage was done.”

He pointed behind them and they saw a small building that hadn’t been there before. The two great astral beings walked over and went inside. Immediately after the door closed behind them, the world outside of the forest city started to warp like running paint. Jason and Shade watched it from inside the forest, which remained unaffected.

“Thank you, Mr Asano. For not hurting my father.”

“I hope he can be a father to you, Shade. I’ve got a pretty good one, and I’m looking forward to seeing him again.”