

Chapter 859

What I'm Scared of on the Other Side of This Portal

When Jason ended the transformation zone, bringing it back into reality, he claimed the soul forge for himself. Having done so, he had all the tools to become an astral king; the forge, the gate and the throne. With the full set completed, the clock on his mortality had started ticking.

The moment Jason had the power to become an astral king, his soul began the process of doing so. His spiritual realm was his true self now, and had been from the moment he acquired the soul forge. His mortal body was now nothing but a vestigial appendage. Like an unplucked apple, it would fall away and rot. Only willpower allowed Jason to hold it together long enough to settle his affairs.

Jason's willpower was strong. He had forged it in fires of tribulation few mortals could equal, clashing with gods and monsters and the fundamental forces of the cosmos. But it was not infinite and Jason's time was up. Barely able to keep his mortal shell standing, he stepped into the void of nebulas and that was the end.

His body dissolved into rainbow smoke, like the countless monsters he had put down. It would not resurrect, as it had before, as this was not death. It was the shedding of skin, like a snake, leaving his old self behind him. He could no longer have a mortal body because his time as a mortal was done.

Rufus looked at himself in the bathroom mirror. His eyes were bloodshot and there were heavy bags under them. It looked like he hadn't slept in a week and he felt like it too.

"What are you doing?" he asked his reflection.

He was aware that Gary's sacrifice had not brought out his best behaviour. His every instinct drove him to the worst choices, despite his best intentions. He felt trapped inside his own body, screaming at himself to be better, even as he kept getting worse. He mistreated the people around him, most of all Gary who deserved nothing but his unswerving support.

Gary was Rufus' best friend in the world. He had made an incredible sacrifice for the best of reasons, yet all Rufus could do was ruin the precious time they had left. Echoes of past loss were poisoning his mind. Jason and Farrah had come back, but he'd believed them dead for years. That grief had been real, and there was no coming back for Gary.

It was time to stop. Stop giving in to his worst instincts. To stop trapping his better nature in his head and let it drive his actions. To be the man — the friend — that he knew he should be.

He closed his eyes and concentrated on his body. He'd been trained better than the sloppy body control he'd been showing. When he opened his eyes, his sclerae were clear and the bags were gone. He looked fresh and ready, like an adventurer should.

He ran a hand over his head, feeling the stubble that had grown as he stopped taking care of himself. He reached for his bag and the depilatory cream inside, but stopped himself. Maybe it was time for a change. He wasn't going to grow the wild mess his brother lugged around on his head, but something different would be good. Change, inside and out.

He grabbed his bag, slung it over his shoulder and walked out.

There was a battleground in Jason's soul. A liminal space, neither real nor unreal. Jason chose what it became. What it was, and what one had to be to exist within it. There were limits, mostly on what he could do with those who invaded his soul, but ultimately their form was his to choose. He made the rules, and any who entered would have to obey them.

The shape Jason chose for the space was a massive flagstone road the width of a freeway with two-dozen lanes. Straight as an arrow, the road stretched out to the horizon in each direction. Spreading out from either side was dense jungle, the road cutting through it like a perfect sword stroke. The sun blasted heat from a clear sky and the humid air felt thick enough to be cut into slices.

Only Jason knew how long the road truly was but, at the very midpoint, there was a building on each side of the road. Constructed from the same grey stone as the road itself, one side had a small building, the size of a garden shed. The other side was much larger, the size of a massive warehouse with a giant sliding door to match.

Painted across the road, in rough but massive letters, were four words in bright yellow. It was crude work, the letters rough and surrounded in paint spatter.

The door to the small building opened for seven people to exit. They were humanoid, but would only pass for human by the vaguest of descriptions. The first out was a corpse-pale man with dark hair, dark clothes and solid black orbs in place of eyes. The next had golden skin and fire blazing on her head in place of hair. Her loose clothes rippled in shades of orange and yellow.

The third person was extremely tall. His long hair and a long beard were both a mossy green tangle. He was draped in hide cloth and had deer antlers rising from his head. Of the group, he had the most trouble leaving the building. It took him almost a full minute, awkwardly turning and crouching to get his horns and massive frame through the doorway.

Four people were stuck inside waiting until he finally cleared the way. The first to follow him out was a woman with plain features and simple clothes. Where the others boasted imposing, alien beauty, she had a dumpy physique and plain looks. Her clothes were cheap and ill-fitting; if not for the blue light shining from her eyes, she would not look out of place in a thrift shop.

Next came a tall woman dressed head to toe in black. Her face was hidden behind a veil and her willowy body was draped in black lace. Following her was what looked like a wizard, but less Gandalf and more cosplay. His beard was scraggly and short from an unfortunate attempt to grow it out. His robes, pointy hat and staff looked like he'd ordered them online, only for them to arrive looking cheaper than the pictures and a size too small.

The final person to leave the building would have been recognised by members of Greenstone high society as Thadwick Mercer.

The six stood on the grass around the building, the only area other than the road not heavily encroached by tropical growth. They looked themselves and each other over.

"He's given us mortal forms," said the fire-haired lady in the tone of someone who found a bag of poop on her doorstep.

"Of course he has," said the wizard. "I rather like it."

This was the Celestial Book, responding to the World-Phoenix's complaint. The woman with blue eyes was the Seeker of Songs and the woman in lace was the Whisper in Corners. The man with the antlers was Legion and the pale man was the Reaper.

"I don't like it," said the Builder in Thadwick's whining voice. "This is the body of the worst vessel I ever possessed."

"You shouldn't be possessing vessels like that at all," Legion said in a deep, rumbling voice. "There are rules."

"I'm not the one who replaced the Cosmic Throne with a bunch of loophole-riddled agreements," the Builder replied. "I'm the one here to fix your mistake."

"You'll fix nothing," the World-Phoenix said. "You're a foolish child."

The Builder's face twisted with rage.

"You're the ones who—"

"Enough."

The Reaper's voice was little more than a raspy whisper yet it cut across the others, arresting attention like a body falling into a grave.

"None of us are well-suited to mortality," the Celestial Book said. "These bodies have minds, which is not a limit we are used to. We normally have our vessels and can use their minds, but we're stuck with whatever Asano has given us. We'll probably find ourselves susceptible to emotions and odd behaviour. Such as engaging in petty squabbles."

"Obviously part of the fool's plan," the World-Phoenix said. "If we cannot think properly, we cannot react properly. Cannot see through whatever he has plotted."

"Given that everyone but you is on Asano's side," the Seeker of Songs said, "the rest of us can simply ask him."

"Where are the nameless?" The World-Phoenix asked. They all looked around and spotted the huge building on the far side of the road. In doing so, they spotted the writing on the road.

"Rumble in the Jungle?" the Builder asked. "What does that mean?"

"We're in a jungle to have a fight," the Celestial Book pointed out. "It's not exactly complicated. I think Asano may have given you a defective brain. Oh, I was right! This is a petty squabble. It's kind of fun."

"It is a song from Asano's world," the Seeker of Songs said. "'Rumble in the Jungle' by Fugees, featuring A Tribe Called Quest, Busta Rhymes and John Forté."

"Is it any good?" the Book asked. "And how can you tell? Why do I know what songs are? I'm troubled that this brain came with information already in it."

"You should be troubled by a lot more than that," Jason said.

Everyone turned to look at him, having not noticed his belated exit from the small building. Being surprised was not something these entities were used to, and it showed in their expressions. Most showed shock and displeasure, although the Celestial Book looked delighted. Legion seemed impassive, although most expressions would look that way from behind the beard.

"You're here," Legion said to Jason.

"Ooh, stating the obvious," Jason said. "You're getting the hang of mortality nice and quick. I'm guessing you're all just starting to realise how much you were reliant on your vessels while possessing them. You never needed to learn how to school your expression because they already knew. I put a few things in your mortal brains, but not as much as your vessels have. You've got language; motor functions; what songs are. The conflict between innocent fun and racist iconography in *The Dukes of Hazzard*."

"This is not a game," the Builder said.

“Yes, it is,” Jason countered, turning to look at him. “This is my game. You all decided to make a battleground out of my soul, but that puts you in my house. I set the tone and I set the rules.”

Jason looked the Builder up and down and frowned.

“I was a little petty with you. Go back into the Building.”

“Why?” the Builder asked, narrowing his eyes in suspicion.

“Don’t then,” Jason said. “If you like being Thadwick, that’s fine. Stay where you are.”

The Builder rushed back through the door and it closed behind him. It opened a moment later and he returned looking very different. He had the form of a tall human, thick with the muscle of work rather than bodybuilding. He was dressed like an archaic stonemason, with simple clothes, a leather apron and tools in his belt. He was ruggedly handsome, with a short-cropped beard.

“Better?” Jason asked.

“Yes,” the Builder said. His new voice was deep and solid. “Whatever issues we might have, I am deserving of respect.”

“Mate, what you deserve is to be kicked in the plums so hard you bounce off the moon. Let’s not get into what we deserve because none of us come out of that discussion clean.”

Gary was standing nervously in front of the portal leading out of Jason’s soul realm. He was so distracted that he didn’t notice someone approaching from behind until Rufus slapped his friend lightly on the back. Gary looked down in surprise as Rufus moved to stand next to him. He looked better, and it wasn’t just that his eyes weren’t bloodshot. They no longer held the anger that had been simmering behind them since Gary made his decision.

“I’m sorry,” Rufus said. “You need a friend more than ever right now, and I’ve been making things harder for you.”

“It’s not—”

“Don’t,” Rufus cut him off. “Don’t try to make me feel better. I’m sorry it took me so long to be the friend you always are.”

“Rufus...”

“What has you hesitating?” Rufus asked, forcibly changing the subject. “What’s waiting for you on the other side? You’re worried about Hero’s power trying to leave your body?”

Gary shook his head.

“I won’t be out that long. I can hold the power inside until I come back into the soul realm, and I need to face the god. Jason said he gave Hero permission to come into the brightheart city.”

“I don’t know what’s worse,” Rufus said. “That gods can be kept out or that it’s Jason they need permission from.”

Gary laughed.

“He certainly doesn’t need an ego boost. Gods show up and he’s annoyed they’re bothering him. You’re going to have to keep him grounded after he turns into a messenger god or whatever it is.”

“I think I’ll be leaving that to the others. I might take up on Farrah’s idea and go to Earth.”

“Really? I didn’t think you would.”

“I want to stay here. Stay with you for however long you have left. But I haven’t been handling this well, and I think making a change is better than falling into old habits.”

“I’m glad,” Gary said. “I’d like the last time we see each other to be when we’re at our best. I don’t want you to watch me slowly degrade until I can’t take it anymore and give back the power. That’s what I’m scared of on the other side of this portal. Your brother brought my parents here, and they will stay with me. No matter what I tell them, I know they’ll stay and watch my body break down. Watch me get sick and weak. Watch me die. I’m halfway inclined to give back the power now and spare them.”

“But you can’t do that to them either.”

“No, I can’t.”

Rufus reached way up to put a hand on Gary’s shoulder.

“Well,” he said. “You may only have me for a day or so, but I’ll stand next to you, brother.”

“I know,” Gary said. “You always have.”