

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—”

Chapter 856

Party to Betrayal

The Builder cultists were in a building in the brightheart city. It was a single-room construction with neither doors nor windows. It looked to be made of large stone bricks, with a few crystals in the ceiling shedding warm light. The cultists were variably looking lost, confused, despairing and angry. A few looked oddly hopeful. Some were lying on the floor looking ill, and all looked human. There was no sign of the body-horror metalwork that was the signature of the cult.

What metal could be found was in the corner, piled in a heap. It was made up of tiny orbs, mostly silver but a few of gold. From each orb ran a rat's nest of threads, like spider webs, now all tangled in the pile.

When a door-shaped section of wall turned from stone to cloud-stuff, all heads not groaning on the floor turned. The leader, Beaufort, leapt up from where he'd been hunched against the wall. Jason Asano walked through the cloud material that turned back into bricks behind him. Beaufort marched up to loom over the smaller man.

"We had a deal, Asano," he snarled.

"Yes," Jason said. "I'd let you go alive. Release you to the Adventure Society. Which is exactly what I'm going to do."

Beaufort flung an angry gesture at the pile of metal.

"You didn't say anything about that."

"No, I didn't," Jason agreed. "I was pretty sure it would work, but I couldn't be certain. You're welcome."

"You expect me to thank you? You took away who we are!"

"Were," Jason corrected. "I took away who you were. And who you were sucked, so again, you're welcome."

Beaufort angrily searched Jason's expression.

"You don't feel any remorse for this, do you?"

"How many people have you killed for the Builder, Beaufort? Do you even know? By rights, you should have burned up any compassion I could feel for you long before we met. But I still did this for you."

"*For us?*" Beaufort asked, shouting his incredulity. "You did this *to us*, Asano. I don't even understand how."

"Surely the Builder warned you about me. Star seeds are a really bad thing to have inside you. They poke a hole in the side of your soul. Gives people like me an access

point. A handle they can grab onto and rip. Normally that's a crude and extremely final process, but it just so happens that I was rewriting some reality recently. It gave me the chance to slip them out, nice and smooth. That's all I did, by the way; I didn't go rummaging in anyone's soul. Could have though. Those star seeds are trouble."

Jason looked over at the pile of extracted star seeds and sighed.

"I just got asked to do a job with the Builder. If I remember, I'll tell him you guys are out of his little club. I'm pretty sure he knows, though."

"We'll get new star seeds the first chance we get."

"That's your business. If you get that chance, though, you can thank me for it. If I hand a bunch of Builder cultists over to the Adventure Society, I'm guessing they'll torture you for any information you have and then dissect you to see what they can learn. A bunch of former cultists with their star seeds removed, though... you're practically victims. Everyone knows that isn't true, but play it up enough and you might make it out the other side alive."

"You betrayed us, Asano."

"Are you sure everyone here feels the same way, Beaufort? I don't know what kind of state you're in after the extraction, but my aura senses are feeling some hope in this room. A chance to be something more than a puppet on the strings of a mad god. I know he's not an actual god, but he's close enough, and you have to admit that was a great line."

"Take this seriously!" Beaufort snarled.

Jason used his aura to crush that of the cultist, pick him up and slam him against the wall. The gold ranker fought back with his own but got nowhere. He was weak after the extraction of his star seed and Asano's aura seemed to come from everywhere.

Jason's feet lifted off the floor and he floated over to look the taller man in the eyes. Jason's expression was serious, just as Beaufort had asked.

"Is serious really what you want?" Jason asked, his voice a whisper. "Because I can do that, Beaufort. I can start taking a real interest in how you spent your life before you and I met. I have a strong feeling that just asking the brighthearts how they feel about you would lead to me cutting you into tiny pieces, scraping your soul with each slice. How about it, cultist? Do you want me to take this seriously? Or would you rather I forget you ever existed and let the Adventure Society deal with you?"

Still pinned to the wall by Jason's aura, Beaufort choked out a reply.

"Adventure Society."

Without another word, Jason floated around Beaufort and through the wall that again briefly turned to clouds. The cultist slumped to the floor against the wall, almost exactly where he'd been before Jason came in.

Leaving the cultists behind, Jason walked through the empty streets of the cloud city. He could feel buildings shift as Lorenn experimented. He could feel the brighthearts in scattered clusters, far too few for the city he had made them.

He took pride in the growing hope he felt in their auras. The brighthearts were finally out of his soul realm and, more importantly, out of danger. They had spent so long in despair, watching their civilisation be chewed up and spat back out as horrors that tried to destroy what was left. The hope they had was just a spark for now, after so long without it. But it was there, in the thousands of brighthearts who had managed to survive.

As for the expedition members, Jason could sense their reunions as more people descended from the surface. He could sense Allayeth with Miriam and her team, as well as the messengers awkwardly avoiding everyone else. Carlos was angry at someone and the High Priestess of the Healer was meeting with a contingent from her church.

Jason considered popping in to speak with Allayeth briefly, but he'd let himself be delayed enough. His body was attempting to unravel itself and begin the process of forming a true astral kingdom, and he could only hold it off for so long. He opened a portal back into his soul realm and stepped through. He had his own reunions to hold.

Jason appeared on a platform fastened to the trunk of a massive tree. He looked around the wide open deck at his friends, companions, and Boris. He didn't want to trust the messenger, yet found himself doing so in increments. Maybe he was trustworthy and maybe he was an unfathomably ancient being that could run rings around Jason's ability to read him. The best Jason could hope for was it being probably both.

Humphrey, looking chastised, was standing at a buffet table with his mother and Sophie. The Remore family and Gary were having a heated discussion, with most of the heat coming from Rufus. Farrah, Belinda and Clive were standing around a table, looking fascinated by something Boris was drawing. Taika was also there, looking confused, but the discussion was muted by a privacy screen. Neil was napping in a lounger made of clouds with a half-eaten sandwich resting on his chest. A moustachioed dog, despite the table full of food, was sneaking up on Neil's sandwich.

Gary spotted his arrival and left the Remores to walk over.

"Jason, you look hung over. Badly hung over."

“Yeah, well you’re not the only one who knows what your body trying to explode feels like. How are you holding up?”

“In your soul realm, there’s no tug for Hero’s power to go back to the god. It’s in there, though, burning away like a furnace. If I stay here I can hold on for a few months, but my understanding is that here will be going away when you do your astral king business.”

“No,” Jason said. “The tree — the tree city, now, I guess — will stay intact. A secure heart while the rest of me gets broken down for parts. You can stay here until it’s too much.”

Gary looked over at Rufus.

“I’m not so sure that’s a good idea. I think a clean break might be better in the long run.”

Jason clapped Gary’s huge, furry forearm.

“Still looking to others, even now.”

“How long can you keep it together?”

“Not as long as I’d like. Long enough for farewells. I’m not going to be seeing anyone for a while.”

“What’s that going to be like for you?” Gary asked. “Kind of like meditating as you turn yourself into a small universe?”

“I think that was the idea.”

“Was?” Farrah asked, patting Gary on the arm as she joined them.

“Turns out I have to... not save the cosmos. Take a first crack at saving it? Make it a little less crappy, maybe.”

“The whole cosmos?” Farrah asked.

“I’m not sure. At this point, we’re talking about a scale way bigger than I can comprehend. The more I learn about the wider cosmos, the more I realise how ignorant I am.”

“Then should you be messing with things on that scale?” she asked.

“No,” Jason said with a laugh. “No, I should not.”

Gary and Farrah both shook their heads.

“I guess it’s nice to know some things won’t change when I’m gone,” Gary said. “You’ll still be off doing Jason things when you really shouldn’t.”

“There’s something we need to talk about,” Farrah said. “Before we make our farewells.”

“I know,” Jason said. “And it’s a good idea. Going to be a hard sell, though.”

“You know?” Farrah asked. “Right, I forgot that, in here, you’re the god-emperor of fancy pants and can listen to all our conversations.”

“I don’t wear fancy pants.”

“Well I’m not the god-emperor of fancy pants,” Gary said “You could tell me.”

“Yeah,” Jason told Gary. “You’re just a demigod of heroism.”

“I miss Erika,” Farrah said winsomely. “I need more regular friends.”

They moved to where Clive, Belinda, Taika and Boris were standing around a table. They entered the group’s privacy screen and were suddenly able to hear the discussion within.

“...would need the knowledge of astral magic theory to actively manage the shell,” Clive was saying. “That means one person. Maybe two, if they *really* knew what they were doing.”

“I do really know what I’m doing,” Boris said. “It’s not a question of capability but of...” He paused as he turned to look at Jason.

“...trust.”

“I don’t suppose someone could catch me up?” Gary asked.

“They want to send me into space in a magic coconut,” Taika said.

Clive winced, rubbing his temples.

“I should not have used that analogy,” he muttered as Belinda consolingly patted him on the back.

“It’s more like a big brown egg,” Boris said.

“The idea,” Belinda told Gary, “is that someone with a gestalt body/soul combination like a messenger or Jason — or you, I suppose — can create a kind of bubble with their aura when they move through the astral. They basically turn their aura into a dimension ship for one passenger.”

“Two, if they’re good enough,” Boris corrected. “It requires constant adjustment of the aura to dimensional forces experienced during travel.”

“The point is,” Farrah cut in, “that Boris can take two people with him when he goes back to Earth.”

“It won’t be a pleasant trip, as I’ve been warning Taika, here,” Boris said. “My kind developed the technique to drag around mortals we needed for whatever reason. In-flight comfort options weren’t a primary concern. It’s spiritual travel that really does hold up the Spirit Airlines tradition.”

Boris grinned expectantly as Belinda, Clive and Gary looked confused while Jason and Farrah rolled their eyes.

"That was sad, bro," Taika said, shaking his head. "I knew you were from Earth, but I didn't know you were a stand-up comedian from 1998."

That got Jason and Farrah laughing and left an offended look on Boris' face.

"Don't give me that look," Taika told Boris. "A domestic airline from the USA? That's a little too specific a reference when most of this group have never been to Earth."

"Too specific?" Boris asked. "Aren't you the *Team Knight Rider* guy?"

"Knight Rider?" Taika asked, looking confused. "Not ringing any bells. Jason?"

"Never heard of it," Jason said.

"You both suck," Boris said with a pout.

"I'm still not entirely clear on what's going on," Gary pointed out.

"Boris," Belinda said, "has an unpleasant but harmless means to take someone with him to Earth. Two people. One will be Taika."

"As for the other," Farrah said, "I left an apprentice back on Earth with only the beginnings of training. I thought we could send someone with the right skill set to finish the job. Someone whose family runs a school."

Gary turned to look over at Rufus, catching his eye. Despite being caught up in discussion with his family, Rufus' gaze never strayed from Gary for too long. The leonid turned to look thoughtfully at Jason and Farrah.

"When he thought you two were dead," Gary said, "Rufus took a lot of comfort in putting adventuring aside and becoming a teacher. I can see what you were thinking on this, but you're talking about a much bigger change than the Greenstone branch of the Remore Academy."

"Change might be just what he needs," Farrah said. "For now. We need to talk to Arabelle about this."

"You need to decide quickly," Boris said. "I have no intention of staying around once Jason's transformation has begun. The Adventure Society will be far too interested in making the acquaintance of me and my messengers. Which leads to the question of whether I'm taking your messengers with me, Jason."

"Yes," Jason said. "I think Marek Nior Vargas and his would-be Unorthodoxy will be happy to follow you, but the others aren't mine and they aren't yours, Boris. They do as they like, and if they want to join your cause eventually, that's their choice. But they are taking refuge in my domains on Earth while they figure themselves out. If I get to Earth and find you've crossed me on this..."

"You don't have to worry yourself on that front, Asano," Boris said. "I was fighting for messenger autonomy before your universe existed."

“So you’ve said. But now I need to trust you with one, possibly two of the people most important to me in the world.”

“I understand how you feel,” Boris told him. “Living as long as I have, I’ve been betrayed more times than the number of days you’ve been alive. And I won’t deny that I’ve been party to betrayal, just as you have. But we’re out of time, playing for stakes that don’t give us the chance to make incremental steps toward trust. I’m all too familiar with that as well. You have to decide now, Asano, to trust me or not.”

“Yeah,” Jason agreed grimly. “I know.”

Chapter 857

Farewells

Everything outside of the tree city that was now the heart of Jason's soul realm was off-limits. Beyond the point where final trees stood was a sharp edge where reality came to an end. Beyond that was border, nothing could be seen but gold, silver and blue haze. There was a private mountain fortress hidden within in the haze but only Jason himself could reach it or survive there.

The realm's remaining occupants had moved into the tree city. Jason was busy making use of his limited time, so his avatars were making arrangements. Accommodation and facilities were set in place for those who would be visiting the intact portion of Jason's realm while Jason reshaped the rest of it.

Before the arrival of the sentient forest, Jason's realm only had one permanent occupant: Melody Jain, Sophie's mother. She had been moved to a palatial estate comprised of multiple treehouses, linked by rope bridges. Close by was the research centre that would hopefully allow her to one day leave the soul realm without her mind being taken over by divine brainwashing.

The research centre was set up for Carlos Quilido. The priest of the Healer had joined the underground expedition, putting his research on pause as Jason was critical to its next stage. The avatar Jason had left for Carlos would help his research by using the soul realm to help people survive their experimental treatments. The avatar would otherwise function as one of Carlos' assistants so Jason could absorb the knowledge on his return.

Clive also had a research centre in the process of being set up, although he was not as reliant on the soul realm itself. Clive would use the space as he needed it, but would mostly be out and about with the team.

The other occupants of the soul realm were messengers, but they would soon be departing for Earth. Part of that group were the messengers Boris had shanghaied in the transformation zone. They were now free of their astral king's influence, thanks to Jason helping them replace Vesta Carmis Zell's brand with marks representing their own identities and autonomy. They had been forced into their current situation but were largely coming around.

More enthusiastic about following Boris were the messengers Jason had held as prisoners since the Battle of Yaresh. Marek Nior Vargas and his people had surrendered to Jason in hope of escaping astral king control and joining the Unorthodoxy. Boris represented their hope of joining a grand cosmic rebellion.

The largest group of messengers in Jason's soul realm were those liberated in the transformation zone. Many of them were variants of normal messengers as a result of how they came into being. Orthodox messengers would never accept them, and Jason wouldn't let the astral kings have them anyway. On top of everything else, they were only months old.

Two messengers stood apart from the other groups. Jali Corrik Fen had become aware of her slavery but thought that she would never escape it, even inside her own mind. Jason had rescued her from that when she'd expected him to kill her, transforming her future and winning her loyalty.

Tera Jun Casta had been a zealous follower of the messenger orthodoxy before her forced liberation at Jason's hands. When she forced him into a death match, inflicting soul torture on her was the only way he could keep them both alive. He had freed her from astral king bondage at the same time, yet she was anything but grateful.

Jali and Tera had been friends, once. Jali's growing doubts and Tera's growing zeal had ended that relationship, but their shared experiences with Jason brought them back together. During the months they spent in his soul realm, they once again found themselves sharing each other's company.

Their reunion had not been easy. Their differences in the past were reflected in their relationships with their shared liberator. To Tera, Jason was the man who tore her away from everything she knew. To Jali, he was the man who saved her from it. Jason was a hard topic to avoid when they were inside his soul, and always led to contention.

It was the group of young messengers that had brought them into alignment. Whatever their views on Jason, they both wanted the best for the young, impressionable messengers. Neither wanted them to have bad influences, meaning Jason for Tera and Boris for both of them. Unfortunately, there were no perfect options.

One possibility was to have them stay in Jason's soul realm. Letting them out onto Pallimustus was not an option, as either the astral kings or the Adventure Society would quickly snatch them up. The other option was for them to go to Earth with Boris. Ultimately, Jason had left the choice up to the young messengers themselves, and they had chosen Earth.

Jason had made clear that he would not tolerate Boris turning them into child soldiers, which Boris at least claimed to completely agree with. Neither Jali nor Tera trusted the man's word and insisted they travel to Earth with the others.

As for what fate awaited them, that was a tricky proposition. There were, apparently, large and extremely secret Unorthodoxy enclaves on Earth. As an alternative, Jason had

given Jali messages to pass on to his family about offering the refugees shelter. As for what haven the messengers chose when they arrived on Earth, that was up to them.

There was a gathering in the tree city, on the balcony of one of the larger treehouses. Boris left as Emir, Constance and Nik joined, completing Jason's core group of friends. This was how Jason wanted to use his limited remaining time. Not making plans or setting things in motion; just being together with the people that mattered most. He put aside the separations soon to come as, for the moment, they simply enjoyed one another's company.

They ate and chatted, Jason and Neil were even vaguely nice to each other. The closest to an outsider was Gwydion, but Rufus' older brother was quickly fitting in. The priest of Hero was lying back in a cloud chair almost prone, between his father and brother. He picked at the food piled high on a plate resting on his chest, sauce stains marking his fingers and his priest robes.

While the group could pretend they had all the time in the world, Jason's ticking clock became hard to ignore when streams of golden energy started rising off his as his body entered the early stages of breaking down.

"Bro," Taika said. "I think you're regenerating."

Jason let out a sigh.

"Looks like my time is coming to an end," he said. "Sadly, there is more to be done, so I have to go."

Danielle Geller got to her feet.

"I know that there are some impending departures," she said. "Most, only for a time, but Gary for the last time."

She looked at him with sad warmth.

"I can offer little consolation for those we won't see again. It's a loss we can never get back, but we should take joy in the chance to say goodbye to Gary. Too often, people are taken from us suddenly and unexpectedly. With Gary, his sacrifice was anything but unexpected. There's so much hero in him that making the choice he did seemed almost inevitable, in hindsight. If anything, Hero doesn't deserve him. No offence, Gwydion."

"You're fine," the priest of Hero said. "He can't hear you in here."

"What I can hopefully help you with," Danielle continued, "are the partings that, while long, are not forever. You will all learn, in time, that temporary parting is a natural and healthy aspect of relationships that run into the decades and centuries. My husband and I are together and apart as we need. It does not diminish our love for one another. We

adventured together. Raised our children together. When our children made their own ways in the world, so did we. Having spent time apart since then, we've just recently been enjoying time together again."

She gestured around the group.

"Friendship is the key. Passion and ardour can get you far and fast, but they won't keep you together as one year becomes ten and ten becomes a hundred. My husband is my best friend in the world, and that is why we will always find one another again, however long we might part."

Humphrey and Sophie shared a look, nervous but hopeful, as Danielle continued talking.

"I have not been a gold-ranker for long," she said, "but I am older than I look."

"You're older than fifty?" Jason called out.

"*Jason!*" Humphrey hissed. Danielle glared at Jason, but the grin she failed to smother undercut any sternness.

"I am older than I look," Danielle resumed, "and I've come to terms with parting ways for years at a time. Today, it's time for many of you to start doing the same. Friends will part, today, but the road is longer than you can understand from the short time you've been together. Your friendships are still in their infancies. That you have forged such strong bonds in only a few years impresses me greatly. I have no doubt that you will be part of one another's lives for longer than any of us can imagine right now."

She turned to Gary again.

"Which makes permanent loss all the harder. I'm sorry to speak of the many years we'll all have together, Gary, when you will not get the chance to journey through them with us."

"No," Gary said. "I made the choice that brought me here. And I like to think that making it is the reason you will all be together for so long, instead of dying in a hole. I can't ask for more than that."

"Are we *sure* we can't swap Jason out for Gary?" Neil asked. "He'd probably come right back to life; you know what he's like."

"Yes, Neil," Humphrey said. "For the eighth time, we're sure."

"What about my backup plan?" Neil asked.

"How is pouring sticky syrup over Jason's head a backup plan?" Humphrey asked.

"I don't know," Neil said. "I just don't think we should dismiss any options until we've tested them thoroughly."

"Are your friends always like this?" Gwydion asked his brother.

“Yes,” Rufus said, staring at Gary as he had been the whole time.

“They’re a fun bunch,” Gwydion said.

“It’s not the time for fun.”

“They seem to disagree.”

“Are you here for Gary?” Rufus asked.

“Someone was going to be here for him. It just made sense to send me. Are you going to make your and his last moments together this maudlin thing? Don’t you want to send him off with some joy?”

Rufus frowned, looking at his big brother with a troubled expression. Gwydion’s expression grew serious.

“As you said, I was sent here. It’s not all family reunions and new friends. I do have an important question in need of an answer.”

“What’s that?”

“Sophie and Humphrey; how open do you think they’d be to a less-conventional relationship?”

Gwydion’s father reached out to flick his son on the ear.

“Ow! What was that for?”

“So your mother doesn’t have to get involved. Behave yourself.”

Gwydion lifted his plate and sat up looking over at his mother. Arabelle was looking at him from under raised eyebrows with an expression that held no amusement.

“Thanks, Dad,” Gwydion whispered.

Jason quietly made farewells with his friends, one by one. He met them in a room just off the balcony where they had all gathered.

“I know you still wonder about your place in the team,” he told Belinda. “I don’t. You have a perspective that only Sophie shares, and she’s so determined to look forward. You’re the only one who looks back, into the dark corners the rest of us don’t understand. There are threats that only you will see coming, and I see you watching for them.”

“Where is all this sincerity coming from?” she asked as she gave him a hug.

“Maybe I’m growing more mature.”

She let him go and gave him a flat look.

“It could happen,” he said unconvincingly.

“...be able to effectively map out astral geometry once I’ve run sufficient testing to accurately designate variable values for non-synchronous time streams across—”

"Clive," Jason said, cutting him off.

"What?" Clive asked, distracted. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"I said that this is the last time we'll see each other for at least a few years."

"Oh, right. Becoming an astral king."

"Yes."

"Just make sure and take a lot of notes. In fact, let me get out some instrumentation that will measure dimensional interactions far better than subjective observations while—"

"I'm not taking a bunch of tools, Clive."

"It's not like you'll be busy," Clive complained. "It'll basically be like meditation, right?"

"Clive, I'll be fighting the World-Phoenix."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Remember how I mentioned that I have to kind of fix the cosmos a bit?"

"I probably wasn't listening. You're always doing stuff like that, *and you never take proper notes.*"

"I'll see what I can do."

"What you could do is take some basic dimensional analysis tools."

"No. Maybe you could find an actual wife while I'm away. You're not still hung up on Farrah, are you?"

"When was I ever 'hung up' on Farrah?"

"Back in Greenstone, when we first met."

"I think all those resurrections have affected your memory."

"They definitely have not."

"In any case, while Farrah is appealingly intelligent, she's also rather socially aggressive."

"You two didn't...?"

"No. As much as I like the idea of shutting you all up, that's a bad reason to select a spouse."

"I wasn't suggesting she was going to marry you. I was wondering if she dragged you into a closet for a tumble at some point."

"Definitely not. And if I was going to go to the trouble of developing a relationship, it would be more efficient than that. Long-term relationships have a superior effort-to-result ratio than casual encounters."

"That sounds like someone who hasn't had a lot of long-term relationships. Or casual encounters, for that matter."

"The point is, I'm not going to rush into something frivolous, and it's not easy finding the right person for extended companionship."

"I can't argue with that."

"In terms of a prospective spouse," Clive said, "I don't want to call people dim, but it's hard to find someone who can... keep up. I'll be interested when you show me someone as smart as Belinda, but is the opposite of a risk-taking burglar whose idea of experimentation is to throw fake babies off a cliff with bombs strapped to them."

"That's a highly specific example. What were you testing?"

"Safety features on a pram."

"A pram? As in, something to wheel babies around in? I don't remember you making those."

"It was while you were on Earth and we thought you were dead. Belinda and I tried a few money-making projects, including a pram that you can link to another personal transport vehicle, like a flying cloud."

"Did they ever work out?"

"Yes, actually. Danielle Geller helped us set up a business. We're operating out of Vitesse and Cyrion, for now, but we're looking to expand into other major centres. It turns out that adventurer parents really like explosion-resistant prams."

"I can see that," Jason said. "Life can go in unexpected ways."

"The point is that it's a great source of funding for research. And for special projects."

"Like you and Belinda raiding a Magic Society Archive Vault?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Chapter 858

Compassionate Strangers

“You really are starting to look rough,” Humphrey told Jason.

“Yeah,” Sophie agreed, wrinkling her nose in distaste. “That pretty gold light coming off you is turning into rainbow smoke — including the smell.”

“It’s only going to get worse,” Jason said. “That’s why Neil is last.”

Humphrey and Sophie had come together for Jason’s round of individual farewells, in a room just off the deck where the others were gathered.

Sophie laughed while Humphrey gave a disapproving head shake.

“There’s something we need to talk about,” Jason said. “You told me to not keep things from the team, so I should let you know about something that happened. The great astral beings want me to do something while I’m sorting out my astral king business.”

“Which astral beings?” Humphrey asked.

“Most of them, I think? Most of the ones with names, anyway. The ones without names are all on the other team.”

“There’s another team?” Humphrey asked, his expression darkening. “And that team has great astral beings on it?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “Look, Humphrey, the details don’t matter. What matters is that it’s important and I’m doing it. I would love if we could all do this together, but that’s just not how this works. It isn’t something the team can help me with, but I didn’t want to go into it without telling you.”

Humphrey let out a low grumble as he ran his hands through his hair in frustration. Sophie placed a hand on his massive bicep.

“When did you find all this out?” she asked Jason.

“Less than an hour ago.”

“You couldn’t have at least talked it through with us?”

“I made my decision fast,” Jason said. “I wasn’t going to change it and time is short enough as it is.”

Humphrey let out a long, growling sigh.

“You need to get a lot better at including us, Jason.”

“He’s working on it,” Sophie consoled. “He’s still terrible at it, but he’s trying. Like a three-legged puppy trying to climb stairs.”

“Thank you?” Jason said. “Look, the good news is, I have a plan.”

Humphrey and Sophie shared a worried look.

“Don’t look like that,” Jason complained. “It’s a good plan. Plus, it will help me keep up with you lot while you’re out there fighting monsters to rank up.”

“What kind of plan?” Humphrey asked.

“Well,” Jason said, “how much do you know about people from Earth punching each other for money?”

“I know you and I have that link,” Farrah said, “but I have no interest in becoming your Voice of the Will. I don’t mean to put down Colin or whoever else you rope in, but there’s an obedient-messenger-slave aspect I want no part of.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said.

They were lounging comfortably across from one another in cloud furniture.

“How risky is this Sundered Throne business you’ve got going on?”

“Humphrey didn’t waste any time, then.”

“He did not.”

“Did he tell you about the plan?”

“He said it was completely incomprehensible. You are still terrible at explaining things.”

“That’s not my fault; they changed the name of the country.”

“And that was a relevant detail?”

“Humphrey and Sophie haven’t been to Earth. They needed context.”

“And that context included something about a king with big hair?”

“It did, as it happens.”

Farrah let out a long-suffering sigh.

“How big a risk are you taking here?”

“By my standards? Very little. If my plan works the way it should, I’ve got this in the bag.”

“*If* your plan works the way it should.”

“I have some unusual advantages.”

“Such as?”

“Such as great astral beings not knowing what happened in the transformation zone.”

“Information gaps aren’t something they would be used to,” Farrah said.

“No,” Jason said. “I don’t think they would be.”

“Just come back alive, yeah?”

“I’d say yes, but it’s kind of complicated.”

“Complicated how?”

“Technically, I’m not going anywhere. I’m leaving a portal open for people to come and go.”

“How does that work exactly? Boris seems convinced that your soul realm and anyone in it will break down entirely.”

“That’s what gave me the idea for my plan.”

Rufus entered the room, empty save for himself and Jason. He looked rougher than Jason felt, eyes bloodshot and baggy in a way no silver-ranker should be.

“You want to sit?” Jason asked.

“No,” Rufus said.

They stared at each other in silence until Rufus finally broke it.

“There’s nothing you can do? Really?”

“I did do something, Rufus. I let him choose his own fate.”

“You couldn’t have sold not dying a little harder? It shouldn’t be hard to convince someone to live.”

“I gave him an honest choice.”

“Then you should have given him a dishonest one!”

Jason sighed, not rising to the outburst.

“You don’t believe that,” he said.

Rufus slumped down and a cloud chair rose from the floor to catch him.

“No,” Rufus said, his voice barely a whisper. “No, I don’t.”

The chair grew wider, turning into a couch, and Jason sat next to his friend. Not knowing what to say, he leaned into him a little and stayed silent.

“Farrah thinks I should go off to your world,” Rufus said. “Teach your niece to be an adventurer.”

“I think you should go too,” Jason told him. “As for what you should teach her to be, that’s for her to decide. The last I saw her, she wanted to be anything but an adventurer.”

“You think distraction is what I need?”

“Not distraction. Purpose. I don’t think you want to be an adventurer right now, but maybe you want to be a teacher.”

“But is it my purpose just because my family runs a school?”

“It’s your purpose because you love doing it and you’re good at it. Because it’s building the future instead of holding onto a past that will slip through our fingers, whatever we might do to stop it. You once told me that helping people learn from your mistakes was more fulfilling than the fear of making the next one.”

“I didn’t make a mistake, Jason. Sometimes you do everything right and it still goes wrong.”

“Yeah,” Jason agreed. “But I think we both know you’re a sackful of bad decisions waiting to happen. I think a completely new context would be good for you. Force you to come at things with a clean slate instead of with all the baggage you have now.”

“You aren’t pulling punches.”

“You’ve got your mum to take the sensitive approach. Sometimes being a friend means telling someone what they need to hear, not what they want to hear. More than once, I’ve spent months and years stewing in my own juices when life kicked me in the beans. I’m not saying that you have to perk up and be happy. Our friend is going to die. But this isn’t about you. It’s about Gary, and you owe him a goodbye that lets him know you’re going to be alright, even if it’s not today. I’m not saying that means going off to Earth, but it does mean showing him there’s a future for you beyond laying around being sad. You know, the way he was after losing Farrah and me until you came along and kicked him in the pants.”

“So, this is my kick in the pants?”

“Yep. You don’t have to get better now, but you do have to get better. If that means going back to teaching in Greenstone, then do that. If it means spending time with a mental healer like your mum, then do that. If it means a clean break in a world where you don’t even know the language, you can do that too.”

“Why would you want me anywhere near your niece in this state?”

“Because I trust you. And I trust my family. They weren’t equipped to support me through all the weird cosmic crap I was dealing with, but losing someone you love? That they understand, but they’ll also have the objectivity of not knowing you and all your baggage. Take it from someone who already jumped worlds: sometimes compassionate strangers can be exactly what you need.”

“Bro,” you’re not regenerating anymore,” Taika pointed out. “You’re leaking rainbow smoke like a dead monster.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “I don’t have a lot of time left.”

“I won’t take too much of it, then. Thanks for keeping your promise and finding me a way home.”

“That was Boris, not me. But I’m glad you’ll see your family again. Keep an eye on mine until I get back there myself, yeah?”

“No worries, bro.”

“Wow, this room smells bad,” Neil said. “Oh, wait; it’s you.”

“Neil.”

“Yeah?”

“I would never say this in front of the team, but you are arguably the most important member in it. I am exceptionally glad that you will be keeping them safe in my absence, just as you do when I’m here. You’re an important friend and you mean the world to me.”

Neil blinked in surprise.

“Thank you for saying that, Jason. It means a lot. It would mean more if you said it in front of everyone else.”

“I know,” Jason said, nodding his head sagely. “I know.”

Neil left the room and reached into the pocket where he’d placed the recording crystal in case Jason said anything heartwarming. The crystal was missing and his fingers found something else instead. He pulled it out to find a picture of himself at the Standish family farm, in a tub full of eels, wearing only a hat ‘with rub-a-dub-dub’ stencilled onto it.

“You have the power to see and change everything here, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Jason said as he emerged from the room to rest a hand on Neil’s shoulder.

“Yes, I do.”

Jason had one last person, not for a farewell, but for a goodbye.

“You don’t have long,” Gary told him.

“How can you tell?” Jason asked.

He was alone with Jason who now had energy pouring off him like a steamed bun. The golden light had turned to rainbow smoke, complete with the extremely unpleasant smell.

“Give me your sword,” Gary said.

Without questions, Jason plucked the sword Gary had forged for him from his inventory. He held it out for Gary to take.

Gary gestured at the air and a golden blaze appeared. He took the sword, scabbard and all, and shoved it into the flames. He held it there for around a minute as Jason looked on with curiosity. He was connected to the sword through a soul link and he could feel something about it changing. Finally, Gary pulled it back out and the flames vanished.

➤ [Items \[Hegemon’s Will\] and \[Hegemon’s Dominion\] have been reforged.](#)

- Items have changed from (silver rank [growth] legendary) to (silver rank [growth] relic).
 - Relics require transcendent power. Most of their abilities are sealed until their owner, Jason Asano, gains access to transcendent power.
 - The owner of a relic always knows its location, regardless of magical or non-magical obfuscation.
 - Relics cannot be used without permission of the owner.
 - Relics can be summoned to avatars of the owner or designated servants of the owner.
 - Relics cannot be destroyed by most forces. A destroyed relic can be manifested again by the owner using transcendent power.
-

Gary held out the sword in its scabbard for Jason to take back.

“Sorry,” Gary told him, “but you won’t be able to use them properly until you’re an astral king. It smells like your about to get onto that, though.”

Jason laughed as he took the weapon and put it away.

“It’s not much of an upgrade on the surface,” Gary explained, “but you’ll never lose it and you don’t need resources and rituals to rank it up, now. It’ll match its power to yours.”

“Thank you,” Jason said. “It’s been six years since you first gave it to me. It feels like forever and no time at all.”

Jason stepped up and hugged Gary tightly, his head only coming up to the huge leonid’s chest.

“You smell so bad,” Gary choked out and Jason laughed through the tears spilling from his eyes.

Jason pulled away from the big man.

“How do we do this?” he asked. “How do we say goodbye? How can it ever be enough?”

Gary put a comforting hand on Jason’s shoulder.

“Jason, you’re going to live a long time. Probably forever. And in that time, you’re going to do a lot of amazing things.”

Gary gestured at Jason, leaking rainbow smoke.

“Starting in about three minutes, from the looks of it,” Gary continued. “We both know you can lose your way at times. You have Shade and all of our friends, but maybe you can do something for me. When you find yourself uncertain of a choice, or wondering if you’re doing the right thing, maybe think back on your old leonid friend, and see if you can’t find a way to choose compassion.”

Jason stared at Gary as tears poured from his eyes. He lunged forward and caught Gary in another hug.

Jason stayed with Gary as long as he could. His last sight of the big man was of a wide smile and a casual wave as Jason vanished. He reappeared in a hidden chamber, in the mountain fortress of his otherwise collapsed soul realm.

He hadn't been able to hold back his tears in front of Gary but now he fell to his knees, wracking sobs shaking his body. He would never see his friend ever again.

Two gentle hands found his shoulders. Shade and Colin were both standing over him while Gordon floated nearby, somehow managing to convey concern in his alien body language.

"I'm sorry, Mr Asano," Shade said, "but you have left things too long already."

Jason nodded and started slowly pulling himself together. He got to his feet and looked around. He was on a catwalk around a magma waterfall, with multiple doors leading out. One led upstairs and three led to his astral throne, astral gate and soul forge, respectively. The fifth and last opened onto a void dotted with colourful nebulas, blazing in the dark.

"Goodbye, Gary," Jason whispered, then stepped out.

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.”

Chapter 860

We Set Out To Have Adventures

On a wide road in an otherworldly jungle, Jason and the World-Phoenix stared at each other.

“I had this whole speech planned out,” Jason said. “About how you used me, only to throw me away when something more important came up. It had this great running metaphor about how people respect their tools. But that would be for me, not for you. I may have taken the extension of your will you poked into my soul and stuck it in a person-shaped box, but that’s just my impression of you. It’s not what you are. So, we might as well go ahead and get started.”

He turned to walk off, then froze when the World-Phoenix spoke.

“Thank you for Dawn,” she said.

Jason turned to look at her, eyes narrowing with curiosity.

“Same,” he said after a long moment. “Thank you for sending her my way.”

He marched into the middle of the flagstone highway and the great astral beings followed.

“The game,” he announced, “is simple enough. In that large building over there are all the nameless GABs that will be fighting alongside the World-Phoenix.”

He pointed down the road behind him.

“They will be attempting to fight their way down this road. The rest of us...”

He pointed in the other direction.

“...will be trying to fight our way to that end of the road. If we get there, you all get kicked out and I can repair the Sundered Throne in peace. Either way, the game ends when I complete my astral king transition. Once that’s over, so is everything else, whether the throne is fixed or not.”

“And if I reach the other end of the road?” the World-Phoenix asked.

“Every time I’m forced back down that road,” Jason said, “it damages my will. If you can eradicate my will entirely, then my consciousness goes away. Stops fighting back. I’ll come back to my senses eventually, so I’m told, but not for a very long time. And I’ll come back funny in the head.”

“You’ll be more than funny in the head,” the Celestial Book said. “Your mind will effectively be destroyed. You’ll only be lucky enough to generate a new one because you’re in the process of becoming an astral king. You’ll be a new person, with no memory

of the old one. And by the time you come to, everyone you know will be immortal or very long dead.”

“Then I’d appreciate you making sure we don’t lose,” Jason told him.

“This is foolish,” Legion said. “You make the rules here. You can only bend things so far with our wills influencing events, but you could have given us far more advantages. You have to know this, so why would you arrange it like this?”

“Because of what we took from him,” a voice whispered, seemingly coming from all around them. The group turned to look at the laced and veiled Whisper in Corners. It was not a great astral being Jason had heard of prior to his meeting with Raythe and Velius.

“He will be forever,” Whisper continued. “But for now, he is young. His friends will grow stronger and his family older in the time he is with us. He will not be there to see or share in those experiences. If not for the fight we have imposed upon him, that time would be far shorter. We have taken time from him, and he chose this path to gain a measure of it back.”

“This won’t accelerate the process,” Legion said.

“No,” the Reaper said, “but it will help him become stronger. His astral king ascension will only take him to a half-transcendent state. Until he completes the path of mortal power and transcends in full, he will have access to the infinite power of the cosmos yet be unable to tap into it. His purpose in setting the board as he has is to accelerate his progress to gold rank. Rather than design it to his advantage, he has designed it to give himself constant challenge, with stakes for failure. He has put in place the conditions to push himself to his limits, and made of us a whetstone upon which to hone his power.”

The Celestial Book burst out laughing.

“You’re saying,” the Seeker of Songs said, “that this man is hosting the largest gathering of great astral beings since the sundering, and he’s using us as a training tool?”

“We have used, and are used in turn,” Whisper said. “My approval is not required for this arrangement, but you have it, Jason Asano.”

“We are great astral beings,” Legion said. “We do not get ‘used in turn.’”

“Petty pride,” Jason said. “I did a good job with these mortal brains.”

“Approve or not,” the Reaper said, “the course before us is set. Our options are to participate or to leave. All that remains is to make that choice and begin.”

Jason’s clothes were replaced with conjured blood robes and his void cloak appeared, draped around him. He took his sword belt from his inventory and strapped it around his waist.

“Yes,” he said. “Let’s begin.”

In the distance, by the side of the road opposite where they’d come from, was a large building. The massive warehouse door on the front exploded outwards. It was reduced to splinters that rained down on the monsters pouring through the massive and now-open doorway.

It was a fight that Jason was familiar with. The nameless great astral beings had taken the form of a horde of monsters; wild, savage and multitudinous in form. The World-Phoenix served as horde leader, somehow commanding what looked like an army of anarchy and madness. More monsters poured from the building than ever should have been able to fit, even with its considerable size. Some were large enough to require dimensional distension to emerge, squeezing out of the door like a cartoon character. These were cyclopians, hydras with talons in place of heads and other humungous monstrosities that towered over the horde.

Jason hadn’t been as attentive with the countless monster forms as he had with those of the great astral beings. The monsters came in myriad shapes with no unifying theme. Some were comical and others horrifying. There were tiny swarms and some bordering on kaiju proportions.

Their forms weren’t the monsters Jason’s had personally encountered. He glimpsed a xenomorph in the horde, or something looking very like one. The most horrible thing he saw within the horde chilled his blood: a street gang from eighties television. They were all white guys with no tattoos but wore leather jackets and bandanas around their foreheads.

“Come on guys!” one of them yelled. “Let’s show them what the Downtown Beat Boys can do!”

“Oh, this is going to get weird,” Jason muttered to himself.

On Jason’s side were all the great astrals beings other than the World-Phoenix. He had chosen the form of their bodies, but not that of their powers. What he did set was their limitations, with all the combatants restricted to silver rank. The great astral beings were further restricted to essence user rules, their powers amounting to self-designed sets of essence abilities.

The results of this were formidable. Jason had seen some of the most capable adventurers in the world, and considered himself able to hold his own amongst them. Amongst the great astral beings, he quickly discovered that he was at the bottom of the bunch. By a wide margin.

It didn't come as a surprise. There were many limits on them, limits matched not to Jason's ability but to his potential. The great astral beings had found and reached those limits instantly. It was now on Jason to find it within himself to catch up to the examples set out before him. It did not start well.

The named great astral beings were far more powerful than the nameless ones making up the monster horde. Only the World-Phoenix could hold her own one-to-one, but there were no duels taking place. Monsters moved forward like the tide as the great astral beings slaughtered them. Every one that was killed respawned some time later, further back down the road. The same was true of any great astral being taken down. That usually meant the World-Phoenix had swept in on someone almost overrun by monsters, or was ambushed herself by multiple of her peers.

The weak link was unquestionably Jason. He himself had set the balance such that it was only winnable if he did his part. He was not doing his part. Time and again he failed. Swarmed by monsters or struck down by the World-Phoenix. He wasn't slower or weaker. He just wasn't as good.

The monsters had a panoply of powers, and were not unskilled themselves. Jason was used to numbers, but not numbers this fast or this capable. While some managed to resist his powers with their own, most didn't. The simple fact was that he couldn't output his afflictions as fast as the monsters kept coming.

The monsters didn't make it easy for him, forcing him to work for every spell or sword strike he landed. He quickly found that his familiars needed to be used with care and precision as well. The trick of spreading afflictions with butterflies was a non-starter, the monsters eliminating each other as necessary to stop their spread. They were intelligent and didn't need the guidance of the World-Phoenix leading them for that.

Colin, normally a weapon of mass destruction for Jason, worked wonders at first. It became clear that the monsters knew exactly how he operated, however, sacrificing their numbers until the leech monster overextended, and then they swooped in. Colin could not reproduce his biomass as fast as it could be destroyed by those with the power, precision and intent to do so, and that was exactly what the monsters did.

Gordon did well enough, ignoring his butterfly powers which had proved ineffective. He stayed in the backline, adding more direct impact to the battle than Jason's afflictions, although he was not a definitive presence.

Shade was the familiar who proved most capable, faring better than Jason himself. Elusive and careful, he aided Jason by scouting and using his bodies as shadow-jump

points. Even so, he could do little more than facilitate Jason, and Jason was falling short. Time and again he was cut down, overrun, torn apart or simply trampled to death.

The other great astral beings on his side were not happy. Even the previously cheery Celestial Book gave Jason accusatory looks.

“It is too late to change what you have done,” Legion told Jason as they fought side by side. “You are throwing away a chance we have waited eons for.”

The tall man with green hair and antlers was fighting in a style Jason could only think of as druid from Dungeons & Dragons. He was summoning wild beasts and turning into them himself to savage the monsters. He cast spells that unleashed poisonous spore clouds or had grasping, thorny vines erupt through the flagstones of the road.

“You’re still getting used to mortal sensibilities,” Jason told him. “Who and what you are doesn’t change. For us, being good at something always means starting bad. After that, it’s about opportunity and persistence. This is a long road we’re on, literally and figuratively. You just wait and see how I change.”

Jason had faced powerful monsters, skilled monsters, cunning monsters and overwhelming hordes of monsters. Never before had he encountered monsters that were all of those things at once. For the first time since his early days as an adventurer, Jason was failing to cover for the drawbacks of his abilities.

Every power set had strengths and weaknesses. Some were more balances, with fewer flaws but no great strengths. Jason’s powers were the opposite extreme, capable of incredible things but with some glaring vulnerabilities as well. The most prevalent was the lack of immediate, impactful damage.

The current situation punished every weakness in Jason’s power set, and not by accident. The battleground had taken shape not just by Jason’s conscious choices but also by instinct. And what he had wanted was a situation that would hammer at every flaw and vulnerability in his fighting style.

From early in his adventuring career, Jason had learned to cover his weakness. Using stealth to buy time. Having familiars or allies to cover shortfalls or distract while he set himself up. Exploiting the environment or the stupidity of monsters that would fall for obvious traps.

None of that was in play now. There was no good luck to be had; nowhere to hide. No environment to exploit or twist of fate to save him. The enemies had the wits and knowledge to punish lazy tactics that had served him well against unintelligent monsters.

His familiars were being punished, Jason quickly realising that he had fallen profoundly short on developing tactics for them. He had always used them, and they didn’t

work for a situation, pulled them back. That wasn't going to work here. He couldn't afford to leave any advantage on the table, so he would need to learn how to work with them more effectively than he had in the past.

He also had no allies to assist him, the astral beings were not covering for him. Not only were they busy fending off the nameless horde, but they had an instinctive disinclination to help him. Jason had put the conditions in place, right down to the instincts within their new mortal bodies. Those instincts drove them to leave Jason to reap what he sowed with the battlefield he had established.

Jason had everything set up to leave himself no options and no excuses. He had his powers, he had his enemies, and all he could do was get better or fail.

One of the major changes Jason had made from the original brightheart city was how to access it. The shaft leading down from the surface no longer terminated in the ceiling of the massive city cavern. Instead, it led to an extremely defensible tunnel through which the city could be accessed.

At the end of that tunnel was an area Jason had set up for Lorenn and her people to use as a diplomatic ward. Emir, Constance, Danielle and Lorenn were dealing with the people who had arrived from the surface. It would take a long time to organise relations with the surface world and, for now, they were in diplomatic triage.

It wasn't just the brighthearts being shielded from the surface. Boris and the messengers had no interest in meeting the Adventure Society. They were in one of the city's many quiet areas, making final preparations to leave Pallimustus and ride the link between worlds to Earth.

It was a city square that wouldn't have been wildly out of place in areas of Europe. Two flat, lacquered wooden platforms were laid out on the ground. Boris, Clive and Belinda were drawing ritual diagrams onto them, preparing to transport Rufus and Taika.

"I know it's a rough workaround," Belinda said. "If this needed to last a couple of weeks, that might be an issue, but this magic will take seconds to activate and then be done."

"It's a crude solution," Boris said, "but as the adorable Miss Callahan suggests, it will save us an amount of complication. Practicality suggests we tailor our efforts to the task at hand rather than some other task out of principle."

"Call me adorable again and you'll find yourself dealing with the practical application of a war hammer," Belinda said.

"I can assure you I meant it only in admiration and ardour," Boris said.

“You keep your sleazy hands to yourself, bird man,” Belinda told him. “You couldn’t handle what I’ve got going on anyway. If you got anywhere near me, I’d break it off.”

“Break what off?” Clive asked.

Belinda and Boris turned to look at him.

“Is he serious?” Boris asked.

“He’s an innocent flower,” Belinda said.

“I feel better now,” Boris said. “He didn’t respond at all when I hit on him.”

“Wait, what?” Clive asked.

Humphrey, Sophie and Neil were saying their goodbyes to Taika.

“You’ll be missed,” Humphrey said. “Your contribution to the team — oof!”

He grunted as Sophie elbowed him in the ribs.

“...is nothing compared to what we lose in a good friend,” he finished.

“Smooth, bro,” Taika said with a grin.

“We are sorry you’re leaving,” Neil said, “but we understand. My family is only on the other side of the planet and I miss them. I can visit them when I like, and think it will be past time when we’re done with all this. I don’t envy you having been stuck, not knowing when or even if you’ll see yours again. We hate to see you go, but I’m glad that you get the chance.”

Taika, the size of Gary before his demigod growth, wrapped a surprised Neil up in a massive hug.

“See?” Sophie asked Humphrey. “That’s how you do it. Did your mother not teach you to talk to people outside of high society functions, diplomatic meetings and battlefields?”

“I think she wanted me to learn on my own,” he said defensively.

“Yes, because she’s famous for leaving things up to chance when it comes to your upbringing. I think she and I need to have a talk.”

Taika burst out laughing at the hunted look on Humphrey’s face. He moved forward to collect them into a group hug, Neil unwillingly caught up as Taika dragged him into it.

Gary, Farrah and Rufus stood together, off to the side. Gary’s parents, after a tearful reunion, were settling their possessions into their accommodations in Jason’s tree city. Gary was making his final goodbyes with his best friends.

Farrah, Rufus and Gary’s team had officially been disbanded years ago. Gary and Rufus had turned away from adventuring after Farrah’s death, and they had never reformed after her resurrection. The friendship had been far more than just a registry with the Adventure Society, however.

“You know,” Gary said, “the first time we met was in a town that was burning to the ground and full of zombies. The last time we met was in a magic city deep underground, next to a crowd of rebellious angels. It’s only been about ten years, but we can’t say it wasn’t exciting.”

“We set out to have adventures,” Rufus said. “No one can say we didn’t succeed.”

Farrah didn’t say anything, grabbing Gary’s much larger frame in a hug, looking like a child grabbing a parent. Her tears wetted the fur on his arm.