

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.”