

## Chapter 838

### The Price

Jason looked from Gary, across the table from him, to Farrah and Rufus on either side. He could feel the tremulation in their auras at being so close to the divine power coursing through Gary. The demigod couldn't contain the power as well as Jason could his own in his soul realm. The power didn't belong to him and his body was an imperfect vessel anyway. The power was slowly but surely eating him from the inside out.

Neither Rufus nor Farrah showed any discomfort on their faces. They would support their friend if it meant pretending they weren't on fire, let alone just being near a powerful aura. Given Jason and the company he kept, it was something they'd long gotten used to.

"Do you want them to stay?" Jason asked Gary.

"Yes," Gary said after only a short hesitation.

"We'll need to explain some things then," Jason said. "They'll have questions. We'll have to tell them why certain things won't work."

Gary nodded.

"Well," Jason said, "Let's get the big things out of the way first. Yes, there is a way to potentially keep Gary alive. And yes, there are problems with it. Hero gave me something."

"Like Healer gave you something?" Rufus asked. "The thing that allowed you to create a new intelligent species?"

"The same sort of item, yes," Jason said. "They're like skill books for gods. Or made by gods for people like me, really. The gods already know what they're doing. But soul engineering is what they teach. Soul engineering isn't exclusive to gods, but they have a natural aptitude for it. Unlike astral kings, which is why Vesta Carmis Zell keeps bugging things up."

"Focus, Jason," Farrah said. "You don't get to ramble off on tangents. Not today."

"Sorry," he said. "The point is, the divine gifts Healer and Hero gave me show me how to do things and make sure I get it right the first time I try. That's how I managed to create Nik without him going horribly wrong, and why trying again probably would. It's also how I know that, if I try to save Gary's life, that won't go wrong either."

"What do you mean 'if?'" Rufus asked, leaning forward in his chair. "There's no 'if' here, Jason. If you can—"

"Rufus," Gary said, cutting his friend off.

"I know you're sad and worried," Jason said. "I know that anger makes you feel like you can do something about that, but we both know it's lying to you. Stop for a moment."

Take a breath. Remember that every person in this room loves Gary. No one here wants him to die.”

Rufus picked up his drink and leaned back in his chair.

“You sound like my mother,” he grumbled.

“And you sound like Humphrey,” Farrah teased and they all laughed. For a moment they were just four friends sitting around a table, but the reason they were there settled over them again, dampening the mood.

“What Hero gave me isn’t for creating life,” Jason said. “It’s about taking one source of external power within a soul and replacing it with another. Right now, Hero’s power is inside of Gary. It can’t reach for its god but the moment we’re out of this transformation zone, it will. Gary can hold onto that power for maybe a few hours but then it will be gone. And it’s the thing keeping him alive.”

“What about your soul realm?” Rufus asked. “Hero can’t get in there, right?”

“No, he can’t,” Jason said. “And if Gary was willing to stay there for the next few months, maybe as much as a year, then he could keep the power.”

“A year?” Rufus asked.

“That’s how long the power would take to kill me,” Gary said. “My body was enhanced to endure the power, but not for a lifetime. The power keeping me alive right now will eventually and inevitably kill me.”

“That’s why Hero gave me the gift,” Jason said. “When the transformation zone is reintegrated into reality, I’ll be claiming it as a domain. Reshaping to my will. Not unconsciously, as when it first formed when my influence was scattered the dividing territories. This will be deliberate. Unified. I’ve done it twice before and I didn’t have anything like the tools I have now.”

“And you believe that you can reshape Gary as well?” Farrah asked.

“If he lets me. If he trusts me.”

“I do,” Gary said and Jason gave him a warm smile.

“I know. I’ll have the soul forge then, and Hero’s gift to guide me. If Gary wants me to, I can strip the divine power out of him and put something else in its place. Something with the power to keep him alive without being so powerful it also burns him out.”

“Are you talking about your power?” Farrah asked. “Making him a Voice of the Will?”

“No,” Jason said. “He’d need to mainline the power I draw straight from the astral. The infinite magic hose that allows me to control my soul realm like a god.”

“It’s god-level power?” Farrah asked.

“Yes,” Jason said. “Transcendent power, like the divine power flowing through him right now.”

“Meaning it would still kill me,” Gary said.

“Yeah,” Jason said.

“Then what?” Rufus asked. “The authority you took from Undeath?”

“I’ve already used that,” Jason said. “I used it to reforge the ghost fire that Death showed me how to make.”

“And it was also from a god,” Farrah said. “I imagine the same problem about too much power applies.”

“Why does it apply?” Rufus asked, his voice rising again. “Jason, why can you seemingly suck up any cosmic power floating around while the first taste of it is killing Gary?”

Jason sighed.

“Because I’m on the cusp of half-transcendent,” he said. “I’ve been moving towards that, step by step, probably since my first soul scar. Some of it by happenstance and some through guidance and effort, but I’ve been moving towards a certain end. Even then, what was left of the avatar, which was less divine power than Gary has coursing through him, damn-near turned me inside out.”

“I didn’t take any of those steps,” Gary said. “I wasn’t prepared. I don’t have a hardened soul and experience wielding vast cosmic power. I was grabbed and stuffed full of divine power that did its best to change me in a way that wouldn’t make me explode on the spot. But I will explode, sooner or later, if the power stays inside me.”

“Then what is it?” Farrah asked. “What power do you want to put into Gary?”

“It’s not a matter of want,” Jason said. “It’s about having a chance, and an exceptionally rare one at that. Do you know how many people have survived drinking from Hero’s cup?”

“None,” Rufus said.

“No, there have been some,” Jason said. “Hero told me as much. I think he doesn’t tell people because he doesn’t want them to hope.”

“That’s bleak,” Farrah said.

“No,” Gary said. “It’s fair. If people drank from the cup thinking there was a way to survive, it’s a choice built on deception. Even if it’s self-deception.”

“But some have survived,” Jason said. “Very few, and only under extremely specific circumstances. And even then, I don’t think they come out the other side the same way they went in.”

"That's the price," Gary said. "That kind of power always comes with a price."

"Yeah," Jason said.

They sat in contemplative silence for a moment. Farrah was the first one to speak.

"Enough dodging the question, Jason. What's the power?"

"The natural array," Jason said.

"The natural array that corrupted everything and started all this mess?" Rufus asked.

"The natural array that is so unstable that we went to prevent it blowing up, wiping out Yaresh and casting the whole region into perpetual darkness as the sky fills with ash?"

"Yes," Jason said. "Once this is over, I'll be remaking everything. Using my ghost fire to purge the taint of undeath energy. Extracting and repairing the soul forge. Re-establishing the natural array in a stable state. Rebuilding a home for the surviving brighthearts. Some other things, including swapping out the power inside Gary, if that's what he chooses."

"And you think this will work?" Rufus asked.

"Yes," Jason said. "The gods knew what was coming better than any of us mortals, which is why they made the choices they did. Undeath tried to seize control of events directly. Destruction cajoled and manipulated those depraved enough to work with him. Healer, Hero and Death understood that if Undeath and Destruction didn't get their way, it would not be a god that decides the ultimate outcome of events."

"They knew it would be you," Farrah realised.

"Yes," Jason said. "Healer wanted the home of the brighthearts healed and his gift set me on the path to participate. Death wanted the power of Undeath purged and showed me how. Hero wants one of his champions to live, and knew that I could do that if he gave me the right tool."

"Then what's wrong with doing it that way?" Rufus asked. "Our options here are Gary lives and Gary dies. Why are you acting like that isn't the easiest choice in the world? Why is using the natural array to keep him alive bad?"

"It's a specific and limited power," Jason said. "That's partly why it works. Like all of us, Gary shaped his soul with essences. Iron and fire. These match this natural array very well, making him compatible with it. But the divine power inside him changed those powers and I don't know how compatible the natural array will be with what's been done. Maybe he'd be almost as strong as he is now. Maybe he'd lose all his essence abilities. Maybe his iron and fire powers would change, becoming something new."

"I thought you said you were sure you could do this right," Rufus said. "This sounds more like you're going to butcher his soul."

Farrah put her hands on the table and leaned forward, about to retort to Rufus' accusatory tone. Jason quietly gestured for her to back off. She gave him a querying look from under raised eyebrows and he nodded confirmation. Her expression was sceptical but she sat back in her, clearly unhappy.

"Rufus," Jason said. "You know the task ahead of us. We're talking about reshaping a section of reality that was ripped out of the universe, chopped into bits and now we're putting those bits back together. Once we've done that, I have to blend the whole thing into sludge, take that sludge and make something new out of it. Something I can fit back into the hole we tore in the universe when we took it out in the first place. And somewhere in there, I have to take Gary, who drank from the cup of 'you're definitely going to die because the gods say so' and make him not die."

Jason rubbed his hands over his tired face.

"There's a reason I'm not skipping down the street in delight that I can keep Gary alive," he continued. "You're correct in that what I'm talking about doesn't sound like things going right. If Gary wants this, what I do to his soul will be ugly. He won't come out of it the way he was, or even the way he is now. 'Going right' means that any of this is possible at all. We need more than a miracle, Rufus. A miracle is what's killing him. We have to undo a miracle."

Jason slumped in his chair as if his words had taken all his energy with them. Rufus looked at him, unsure of what to say, so Farrah filled the gap.

"Do you remember what Jason said at the start of this conversation?" She asked Rufus. "That he'd need to tell us why some things wouldn't work. He was blunt in answering you, but do you think Gary doesn't know this? You think he doesn't feel what's happening inside him?"

Rufus turned to look at Gary who continued to sit impassively in his throne-like chair.

"He might not have known exactly what Jason was going to say," Farrah continued, "but he knew enough. He understands what's happening to him. He knows better than any of us that he made a sacrifice and there's no getting around that. Even if he doesn't die, there's a price he paid for the power we did and still do need. He knows it. He's accepted it. He's just been sitting there, barely speaking, because he's waiting for us to accept it too."

"Well, I don't!" Rufus yelled.

"Too bad," Gary said. "Jason had you bring me here so he could give me a choice, not you. All three of you are right. Farrah's right that I understood what I was doing the moment I chose to put that cup to my lips. Jason is right that this is something I have to

face. And you, Rufus, are right that this is awful and unfair. But that doesn't make it go away."

Rufus chair fell over as he got up and threw his arms around the leonid. Gary was still taller, even sitting down. He put a big arm around a weeping Rufus.

"Your tears are making my fur wet," Gary teased.

"Shut up," Rufus said with a laughing sob.

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The four friends sat around the table that had accumulated more empty bottles.

"Where did you get something that would make a demigod drunk?" Rufus asked.

"I am not drunk," Gary said. "Maybe a little tipsy."

"It's for diamond-rankers," Jason said. "There was some left after I made dinner for... it doesn't matter where it came from."

"I'm sorry, Jason," Rufus said as he absently rubbed his head with a cloth. "I never should have gone off on you like that."

No one at the table had managed to fully hold onto sobriety, but Rufus was more in his cups than the others and had a noticeable slur to his words.

"You don't have to be sorry to me," Jason said. "I know you don't expect me to do what I can't. The anger needs to go somewhere, and you should be angry. We all should. We just don't get to do anything about it."

"No," Rufus insisted. "It isn't fair."

"There is no fair here," Jason said. "I keep coming back, every time, but Gary gets caught up in one miracle and..."

He drew a ragged breath and let it out in sobs before draining his glass.

"Tell me what it'll be like," Gary said. "If I let you stick this natural array up my bum or whatever."

"It'll suck," Jason said. "I don't know what'll happen to your powers. Or your mind. I know you won't get any stronger. However strong you are is how strong you'll stay. You won't die, which is good. Like, ever. Not as long as the array is there. I can probably come back and move it when the planet dies. Shade, remind me to come back and move the natural array in five billion years or whatever."

"Of course, Mr Asano," Shade said from Jason's shadow. Jason failed to notice the headshake practically audible in his familiar's tone.

"The thing is," Jason continued, "you'll be completely reliant on the array. If anything happens to it, you die. And you can't leave it. You have to stay within its influence. You can live forever — terms and conditions apply — but you'll live your whole life in the

brightheart city. So we should try to make sure that cultists and messengers and undead don't invade it again."

"I can't go anywhere?" Gary asked.

"Nope," Jason said. "Sorry. It's a pretty bad deal."

"You can't die, Gary," Rufus said.

"You don't have to choose now," Jason said.

"He doesn't?" Rufus asked. "Then why did you have us bring him here."

"So he gets time to choose," Farrah said. "That's super obvious. I think your head wax is making your brain go runny."

"I don't wax my head," Rufus insisted.

"You're waxing your head right now," she told him.

Rufus looked confused and brought the hand holding the cloth he was rubbing his head with down in front of his face. He looked at it as if he'd never seen it before, despite it being monogrammed with his initials.

"How did that get there?"