

## Chapter 891

### Butchery

Jason didn't need to fly around in a sphere or have Shade turn into a vehicle to get around his realm. But after years of being what amounted to a disembodied spirit in landscapes that were more metaphor than reality, he was enjoying the feeling of limitation. And, by alerting Carlos of his approach, the priest had the chance to prepare for an event he'd been working towards for more than fifteen years.

Carlos had been conducting his research inside Jason's soul realm because here the fundamental rules of reality could be altered. Pain, damage, even death itself could be suspended. He had been using that cheat to advance his research in ways that would otherwise be illegal, unethical and lethal. But, while Jason's avatars had been helping, making those changes at his direction, there was only so much his avatars could do without Jason's direct intervention. But now, with Jason's return the next big step could be taken.

Now that Jason was no longer distracted, he could give his full attention and focus to Carlos and his work. He let Shade glide him over the streets of Arbour as a black skimmer. The roads were collections of rocks set out in wide pathways, less surfaces to drive on than navigation aids for the winding routes through the tree city.

The current residents were all high-rankers who could provide their own — usually flying — transportation. For the future, large constructs of living wood were scattered throughout the city. Shaped like buses, but on legs instead of wheels, they would provide a public transportation system, not just able to navigate the roads but also climb the larger trees of the very vertical city. While inactive, as they were now, they could sink their root-legs into the ground to absorb nutrients, or climb high into the trees for more sunlight.

Shade's black skimmer was free of colour. Allowing Colin and Gordon to influence the vehicle would add defensive properties, but in Jason's astral kingdom, the greatest threat was something they could not guard against: a cranky shadow familiar.

The vehicle slowed to a stop at a large stone building, set on the ground between a trio of massive trees. A group came out to greet Jason, comprised of Carlos, Cassin Amouz and one of Jason's avatars.

Cassin Amouz had arrived within hours of Carlos giving a letter to the desk attendant in Rexion, stationed outside the portal to Jason's kingdom. A portal courier saw that the letter reached Rimaros with haste and another portal brought Cassin to Yaresh. His gold-

rank speed allowed him to reach the shaft and descend with swiftness, now that it was largely safe.

Cassin was heavily invested in Carlos' research, both literally and figuratively. He had poured the considerable wealth of his family into it, in hope of saving his son. Gibson Amouz had been held in magical stasis for years, and even then might have passed away without Jason's realm turning off death itself. He had been caught midway through an elaborate corruption ritual by the inaptly named Order of Redeeming Light.

Saving Gibson was Cassin's goal, but for Carlos it was a first step. What they learned in doing so would hopefully lead to purging other dreadful afflictions, beyond even the most powerful essence abilities. Cassin had provided every resource necessary for Carlos to save Gibson, and pledged to support his research perpetually if successful.

The avatar melted in an instant and flowed through the air as a liquid of red, black, blue and orange. Jason extended a hand and it was absorbed into his body. Absorbed with it was the knowledge and memories the avatar had acquired in more than a decade as Carlos' assistant. Jason blinked a few times as he processed everything the avatar had seen, done and learned working for Carlos.

"You've been at this for a long time, Carlos, and I see from my avatar that you wasted none of it. I'm guessing you'd be happy to not stand on ceremony and just get to it?"

Relief showed in Carlos' entire body as a nervous tension left it. Rather than respond, the Healer priest turned and went inside, waving at Jason to follow. What came after was lengthy and complicated. The interior of the building had a hospital's sterility, nothing like the earthy scents and warm colours of the autumnal city outside. The operating theatre was filled with specialised tools, many developed by Carlos in the preceding years. Dominating the room was a tank where Gibson Amouz was floating, upright and unconscious.

The original research assistants were long gone, replaced with a slew of compliant avatars. They didn't even have Jason's appearance, the way the one he absorbed had, let alone any of his personality. These were simple dark figures, like bland copies of Shade, but each bearing a single nebulous eye on their heads. Carlos liked them because they were precise, tireless and silent.

The process of saving Gibson had more in common with surgical procedures of Earth than traditional Pallimustus ritual healing. Carlos had developed a method of causing all the tainted magic in Gibson to physically manifest, then cut it right out and off of his body.

It was grim, visceral work, with Carlos, Jason and the avatars being painted in blood and gore. A gold-ranker might have survived the process, but only Jason eliminating the

concept of death and pain allowed Gibson to make it through. Finally, the corrupting magic was excised and Carlos used more traditional magic to restore the boy's savaged body.

Cassin Amouz watched the entire process, hour after hour, with unflinching resolution. When all was done, Carlos ran every test he could to determine Gibson's condition. Declaring there was nothing left but to wait for Gibson to awaken, Carlos led Jason out, leaving Cassin with his son in a recovery room.

Carlos and Jason staggered, exhausted, into crystal wash showers. They had burned through and recovered astounding amounts of mana over seven hours of intense ritual magic and painstaking pseudo-surgery. Elaborate sigils carved into flesh with painstaking precision. Mana carefully channelled through devices designed and built by Carlos himself in his research.

They stumbled out of the building in fresh clothes and fell onto a wooden bench in front of the stone building. They took in the evening air, cool, fresh and earthy. Even Jason's prime avatar was strained by a sequence of interlocking rituals more intense and extended than anything he had done before. He did recover much faster than Carlos, however, drawing on the power of his kingdom.

"This is just the beginning," Carlos declared with weary satisfaction.

"I hope you learn a lot from this," Jason told him.

"I believe I will," Carlos said. "I had every measuring tool that could even potentially be useful in there, and a few I invented myself. But there is a long way to go. The next step is refining the procedure. This crude butchery that relies on the local god to alter reality is an unsustainable approach."

"I'm not a god, Carlos."

"You suppressed the very concept of death."

"At most, I'll accept god-adjacent."

Carlos turned to look at Jason.

"You haven't noticed, have you?"

"Noticed what?"

"How long have you been wearing that special avatar of yours?"

"Well, that took about seven hours, so, eight or nine hours."

"I've worked with your avatars for a long time now, Jason. They are a bland lot, for the most part, but I've become familiar with the linguistic quirks they've inherited from you. The way your translation power handles turning your language into mine. This new avatar isn't speaking my language."

“It’s not?” Jason said, listening to his own voice. He’d become so used to his mouth using myriad languages it had become background noise. When he concentrated now, what he heard was English.

“You’re speaking a language that my mind says is mine, but isn’t. I have enough control over my perception to recognise that it’s not my mind understanding you but my soul. It’s how gods sound.”

“That’s not good. I can mask my eyes now, so it’s easier to buy pies, but now you’re telling me voice is all weird?”

“It’s not that it sounds different. If anything, you sound more natural than ever. I suspect that people are going to hear their own language from you, whatever language you use.”

“Like when gods speak to people.”

“Exactly. It’s like there’s a power infused into your words. Not aura, exactly, but something similar. I’m not sure how to describe—”

“Authority,” Jason said. “I suspect the word you’re looking for is authority.”

“Yes,” Carlos said, nodding. “That’s the word.”

Jason shook his head.

“That might be a problem,” he said. “I’ll have to see what I can do about suppressing it, but it’s one more thing on the list at this stage. Training never stops does it?”

“Not if you’re doing it right,” Carlos said with a chuckle. The apparent success of his procedure after so many years of build up had transformed the tense man into a languid puddle.

“What now for you?” Jason asked. “Refining the procedure, obviously, but what’s the next practical step?”

“Assessing young Gibson. Getting as much information as I can from him. I need to monitor his recovery closely and make sure it’s complete. As for the procedure, I have two goals. One is removing the reliance on you, and the other is having the procedure work on the fully converted, not just someone halfway through the process of corruption.”

“How long until you’re confident of working on someone fully affected by the Order of Redeeming Light’s ritual?”

“You’re thinking of Miss Wexler’s mother?”

“All of them. While those we know matter to us, we have to keep sight of the wider implications. The greater good we can accomplish.”

“I am glad you’re not short-sighted in this. While my goal is to escape reliance on your soul realm, it remains a valuable asset in the short term.”

“You should know that I will be taking my astral kingdom away in a little while. I’ll be returning to my homeworld for a time, and I will need my prime avatar to open doorways to it.”

“That wasn’t an issue before.”

“The rules are different now. Very different. The portals I established before were to a hazy half-reality. This place is only a pocket universe, but it is a universe, complete and whole.”

“That is unfortunate.”

“Possibly not. Much of what we did today was reminiscent of how medicine works on Earth, where I come from. I don’t imagine there will be a lot of direct crossover, but there might be a lot for you to learn there.”

“You would take me?”

“I intend to take a lot of people. Seeing an entire other universe is a rare opportunity, perhaps especially so for you. My world has an entirely different medical paradigm, not to mention a very large number of vampires. Your ultimate goal is a cure for vampirism, is it not?”

“Lesser vampirism, yes. Those who have accepted it into their souls are beyond any intervention.”

“I have some things to settle here, before I set out. But you can work on the other victims here while we travel. How long will it take for you to consider using this process on those fully affected by the Order of Redeeming Light’s influence?”

“I can do it soon, if they’re willing to accept a butcher job like this one. I want to use those procedures to make the process less aggressive.”

“And therefore survivable outside my kingdom.”

“Precisely. How long that takes depends on how much we get from today’s results. We need to see how Gibson progresses over the next few weeks. I’ve been preparing for this for a long time, and I won’t squander this opportunity by rushing things now.”

“Let’s try and get the Redeeming Light victims sorted out first, then. I have some things to do before I head for Earth, so you’ll have time to assess Gibson and decide if you want to join me. I genuinely think there are things for you to learn there and you’ve been working for so long, with so much focus. You could stand to clear your head.”

“Arabelle keeps telling me the same thing.”

“And she’s right. But I recognise how important this work is. I want you to know how much I admire what you’re doing, and why you’re doing it. I’ve saved quite a lot of lives as an adventurer, but I’m famously the guy with the evil powers. I have one cleansing power,

and even that kills my enemies. The only solutions I have to offer come in the form of violence and horror. You're doing something that will help people heal from some of the worst things that can be done to a person."

"I'm a priest of the Healer. It's my duty."

"Duty will take you far, Carlos, but this is well past that. I know you've been through some things. I don't know what they are, but I'm sure they're a part of what has made you so driven. That doesn't change the fact that you are doing something amazing here. Something good."

"Good enough that you'd put a temple of the Healer in the Brightheart city? Even before the portal shut, I wasn't going to church very often. It was too far away for me to leave the work that long."

"Actually, Carlos, that's already in the works. If it's been a while, you might want to go say g'day to your god, though. He might think you've ghosted him."

"My god does not think I've abandoned him."

"I don't know, mate. Someone doesn't hear from you in a while, they start to worry. Get insecure. Did something happen to Carlos? Is he alright? Has he been hanging out with other gods? I knew I saw him looking at the temple of Lust, and he says he wasn't, but I know what—"

"With all due respect, Mr Asano, please go away."

"Fair enough."