

Chapter 738

Listing Off Animals

Sophie, Jason and Melody were in a blank room in Emir's cloud palace. Carlos, Arabelle and Emir were watching through a wall only transparent from the outside. Even knowing that her mother was more unstable than ever, Sophie was astounded at how quickly Jason sent Melody into a frenzy. She had already attacked them once, Sophie deflecting her strikes harmlessly. Melody eventually calmed a little and went back to verbal assaults.

"It's not going to work," Jason told Sophie as he gestured at his portal. It was the only object in the room that was otherwise blank and empty. "She's seen the truth, even if she can't admit it to herself. There's nothing we can do about that."

"What truth?" Sophie asked.

"That her false god isn't as powerful as I am."

Even knowing that Jason was putting up an act, Sophie was astounded and the man's gall. Not only did he look every inch as if he believed it but his body language seemed astounded that it wasn't obvious.

"Even for you, that's arrogant."

"Not if I'm right."

Melody came to the boil as the other two ignored her, storming up to Jason.

"Your blasphemy—"

"Is easy enough to prove baseless," Jason cut her off, Melody staggering back as Jason unleashed the full power of his aura. He hid nothing, from the touch of the gods to the echoes of his battles with the builder to the power of his soul realm, hidden behind a threshold. Sophie wasn't subjected to the brunt of it but still backed up to the wall herself.

Jason stepped forward as Melody stepped back, mentally staggered by Jason's aura barrage. She soon had her back to the wall with Jason standing in front of her. He was too short to loom but he didn't need to. His presence was visceral, his aura almost a physical thing as it pressed against Melody. While she had backed off, however, Melody looked anything but intimidated, snarling like an animal, even snapping her teeth at him.

Sophie didn't recognise her mother. This wasn't the sharp woman she had come to know over the last couple of months. It wasn't the bold woman who went toe to toe with Jason in physical and verbal combat. This was the thing inside her, the taint that had desecrated her mind. Now it had suppressed that mind almost entirely, leaving little more

than cruel, savage instinct. This was the so-called Flames of Purification, their true nature laid bare.

"Here's the truth, Melody," Jason said, his voice as calm as her face was wild. "I'm here for one reason: to rip the faith right out of you. I'm going to do that, and I don't think your god has the strength to stop me. Not in my domain. If you go through that portal, I can shut your god's power down like it was nothing. Your god is a fraud and you know it, even if you won't admit it to even yourself. But you know, deep down, that he's an illusion. A disguise. And through that portal, he's not even that. He's vapour, washed away by even the gentlest breeze."

"If you believe that, then you're a fool," Melody snarled. Jason laughed in her face.

"Yes, I'm a fool," he said. "I never denied it. Which means that your god can't even stand up to a fool. You think your faith is so grand, but I can crush it as easily as I can break an egg in my fist. Your god is a lie. An obvious façade, depthless and impotent."

"YOU KNOW NOTHING!"

"You can say what you like," Jason said softly. "If you lack the faith to put that faith to the test, then all you're doing is screaming into the dark, shrinking from the fear that you're wrong. That your god really is an empty shell."

Melody raised her arms to hammer on Jason but he gave his aura a physical force and pinned them to the wall. He frowned as he looked her over, watching her struggle.

"You're too weak," he observed. "I bet it's because your faith isn't the real deal. Someone slapped it together from recycled vampirism and shoved it inside you. Normally something like that takes away your powers, but there's no denying you're a monster someone made when your essence powers go away. I guess even brainwashing can only go so far. I think when that poison inside you is taking greater control, the limitations of the source material start coming through. You can't use your strength the way you normally could. Can you even use an essence ability right now? I'll wait."

Melody said nothing, glaring venom at Jason.

"Wow, you really can't," he said. "I guess that's what happens when your faith is as fake as your god."

"My god has power beyond your imagining."

"Is that so?" Jason asked lightly and his presence in the room surged. Sophie let out a ragged breath and the cloud-substance of the walls rippled like the surface of a pond. He brought his head close, whispering in Melody's ear.

"I don't fear your empty god because I don't have to," he gloated. "You know I'm right. You can feel my power, rattling your bones. Shaking your soul. And where is he? Your god

is weak, and this is only a taste. A paltry echo of what I can do, almost as empty as your sad little deity.”

“You are nothing before my god.”

He stepped back and laughed.

“But I’m not before your god,” he said. “You’re before me, and your god is conspicuously absent. You see, everyone knows the truth now. Purity is dead and has been for a while. Someone else has been pulling a *Weekend at Bernie’s* but now the game is up.”

“Spitting nonsense won’t help you, Asano.”

“My track record says otherwise, but you’re right. Out here, our words mean nothing. The only way we can prove if your faith is real is if you come into my house, my domain. There, either your god has the power to sustain your faith or your god is nothing. But you won’t, will you? Because you know I’m right and that your god is just the echo of a power long dead.”

He turned to look at the portal.

“That is your leap of faith. The only place you can prove me wrong.”

He gave another mocking laugh.

“I’ll be waiting, but I’m taking a book because we both know the truth. If you follow, you won’t be able to deny it anymore, even to yourself.”

Jason moved through the portal, Sophie watching her mother’s expression. For a moment, something recognisable appeared, a spark of doubt. It immediately triggered a furious snarl of zeal and Melody stormed through the portal after Jason. A short time later, a wall vanished to admit Emir, Arabelle and Carlos to the room.

“I was worried he was going too hard,” Emir said. “Being too obvious.”

“No,” Arabelle said. “Zealots, like any extremists, have various weaknesses. Denying the validity of their faith is one of the biggest. They’d rather be martyrs than let their beliefs be stepped on. That’s a generalisation, of course, but it applies here. Jason pulled out the power influencing her and drilled on that faith so it kept shutting out Melody’s rational mind. He made the thing that stops us from saving Melody the tool that gives us a chance to.”

“And only the beginning of who we save, I hope,” Carlos said. “Jason’s realisation that Melody loses her original strength if the influence grows too controlling is interesting. It may be a means to validate my ideas about isolating the influence in order to identify and extract it. We should go in.”

Arabelle looked to Sophie still shaken. Sophie nodded, her usual stern expression snapping into place. She marched to the portal and stepped through.

The portal opened to a large grassy area in Jason's soul realm, the size of a sports field. Jason watched Melody as she came through the portal; saw her face as she sensed the nature of his soul realm. She turned to him with ferocity in her eyes but when she opened her mouth, no words came out.

"I made sound stop existing around you," he told her. "My voice probably sounds strange. That's because you aren't hearing it. I'm triggering your body's ability to process sensory information to make it perceive my words directly."

Melody moved to lunge at him but instead floated into the air, arms and legs flailing helplessly.

"I'm going to keep you there for the moment," he told her. "If you want to get down, I'd try prayer. That's why you're here, right? To prove your god is more powerful than me?"

Melody continued to rant silently, thrashing her limbs ineffectually.

"You'll have to forgive my taking the chance to villain monologue," he told her amiably. "I haven't gone full chuuni like this in a while and it's the little things that make life worth living, you know? So, please bear with me while I explain my evil plan. Oh, hold on. I need to set the scene."

Metal industrial-style walls rose from the ground which itself turned from grass to concrete. Metal catwalks and large vats of chemicals appeared. A high ceiling formed overhead, strung with patchy fluorescent lighting that left the dingy warehouse full of shadowy nooks. A winch lowered a chain that wrapped around Melody, no longer suspended by levitation. Jason stepped back as a pit opened up underneath her, filled with molten metal. The radiant heat alone would have killed an iron-ranker and done a bronze-ranker significant harm, even with their resistance to non-magical damage. The pit was massive and the back of a lava crocodile surfaced briefly before slipping back into the liquid.

A watch appeared on Melody's wrist.

"It's got a laser in it," Jason explained. "Oh, a laser is... well, you'll figure it out or you won't. Anyway, evil plan. You probably didn't understand what I was saying about the body processing sensory information, but I've been studying medical texts. In preparation for today, in fact. Pallimustus has a surprisingly solid foundation of knowledge when it comes to human physiology, although it's still cavemen with sticks compared to what Earth has. Earth is the planet I come from, by the way. But, what I just said is only true when it comes to baseline humans. It'll hold pretty well for iron rankers, but once you get into late bronze and silver, the rules get very different. Magic, you know?"

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“Now, once magic gets involved, the knowledge base on physiology on Pallimustus gets a lot better. Healing magic, as it turns out, has a lot more to it than casting *Cure Light Wounds* and walking away. That works for your garden variety injuries, sure. Stabbing and whatnot. But magic can do some seriously nasty stuff to do to people, and I’d know. I damn near killed your daughter once and I barely touched her. That was at iron rank. Trying to heal through what I do to people now? I have afflictions that make the healing kill you.”

Jason sighed and shook his head.

“No wonder these speeches always get interrupted. Establishing context alone takes forever. Anyway, I’ve been studying healing magic theory to get a better sense of how magical bodies work. You see, I can do just about anything here, but if I don’t know what I’m doing, it goes tits-up once you take it outside of my private little realm. I can rip that Flames of Redemption crap out of you right now, but you’d drop dead the second you left this place. Until I know how to do it right, the cancer stays in.”

He shrugged.

“That’s why I’ve been doing some book-learning. Once we figure out the details we’re going to help you and people like you. You might even be the key to curing things like vampirism, how good would that be? I don’t need to be a total expert in healing magic, thankfully. I have people for that. But I need a solid grounding if we’re going to make things work. Inorganic stuff is much easier than people. I’ve been making my friend Gary all kinds of metals to…”

He trailed off and shook his head again.

“I’m losing the thread here. I should have written this down, but I think there needs to be a certain level of improvisation in a proper villain speech, you know. A certain rough authenticity that plays off the unhinged charisma. Is that immodest to say? I’m sure it’s fine. Anyway, the point is that I’ve been working with this bloke Carlos to try and get that stuff out of you for good. Sadly, that’s not what’s happening today. Carlos hasn’t done enough research and I haven’t done enough study to reach that point.”

He looked to the portal, now set into one of the walls.

“Today, we’re just going to try turning the external influence inside you off without removing it. We’ll see where that gets us. Talk to the real Melody, whatever’s left after years of having that artificial faith twisting her head around through her. I think we’ve gotten close already, which is why things have gone a bit wrong. You keep pushing her down, you being that Flames of Redemption crap. Are you sentient on your own? Can you

think for yourself or are you just a mindless parasite? Maybe we'll get some answers today."

Jason looked at the portal again.

"Still not here," he mused. "Okay, I'm going to set this chain to slowly lower you down and then walk away assuming everything went to plan... oh, here they are."

Sophie, Arabelle, Carlos and Emir arrived through the portal and started looking around at the creepy villain warehouse.

"Jason..." Arabelle said in a tone of long-suffering admonition.

"What?" Jason asked, the image of boyish innocence.

"What is this?"

"What is what?"

"This place?"

"I have no idea. It was like this when I got here."

"Really?"

"Yep. I think Gary might have set it up. Look at all that molten metal. He's probably taking a stab at industrial smithing."

"You're claiming Gary did this."

"Yeah, that kooky leonid. What will he get up to next?"

"So, there aren't iron sharks swimming around in that molten metal."

"Absolutely not."

"Or fire piranhas."

"I can, in all honesty, assure you that there are no piranhas of any kind."

"Lava crocodiles."

"Look, we can stand here listing off animals all day, but we're here for a reason."