

## Chapter 621

### An Evil God Sitting on Her Shoulder

“The full explanation is somewhat complicated,” Arabelle said.

“It’d bloody well want to be,” Jason told her. “If there’s a simple explanation for how your team member ended up chasing around my team member’s evil brainwashed mum because he’s in love with her, a lot of people have been very, very oblivious.”

They were sitting in the cloud yacht as it hovered over the jungle beside the road leading into the city of Rajoras. They were drinking tea and watching traffic go past in the pounding monsoon rain.

“I’ll take you through what happened, as I understand it,” Arabelle said. “But know that all I have to go on is Callum’s account.”

“And Callum isn’t at his most reliable, right now.”

“Just so,” Arabelle said. “It’s disconcerting, seeing him like this. He’s never been good at dealing with people, but he’s always been stoic and reliable. Now he’s anxious and unreliable, and chasing around after a woman. Seeing him so different to when we used to work together is downright startling.”

“Have you considered letting Carlos have a look at him? Make sure there’s nothing affecting Cal beyond stress?”

“That was the first thing I did once I realised how far from normal Cal had become. I had him checked for signs of the Order of Redeeming Light’s ‘purification’ ritual, then anything else Carlos could find. This wasn’t any outside influence that he could dig out, which means that it’s all but certainly not outside influence. Finding and dealing with soul influences is his specialty; he’s at the top of his field. From star seeds to vampirism to plain soul trauma, he’s the best there is.”

“Which is why he’s so obsessed with helping the Order of Redeeming Light members, I assume?”

“Yes. And why the authorities are giving him leeway to handle this. Not a lot of people would be allowed to put a group of important prisoners in stasis and haul them around in a bus.”

“If he doesn’t fall under Carlos’ specialty,” Jason said, “then he falls under yours. Good old-fashioned mental health problems.”

“Yes,” Arabelle said. “Strictly speaking – ethically speaking – I shouldn’t be treating him, because he’s too close to me. The Church of the Healer gave me special

dispensation because he refused to even speak to anyone else and they thought he'd open up to an old team member."

"And he did."

"Of course he did. And it took me a while, but I teased the whole story out of him. At least, the story as it happened in his mind. I'll be interested to hear Sophie's mother's version of events, but having them meet now would be a disaster, given the states they're both in.

"Melody seems fairly together," Jason said. "Her aura doesn't match her body language, though. She's masking a lot of fear and confusion."

"Exactly," Arabelle said. "Too many unknown factors to bring them together yet, even if it would answer a lot of questions. The goal is to help the both of them get better, after all, not satisfy our curiosity."

Jason nodded.

"Let's start with how things went from Cal's perspective, then, shall we?"

Arabelle nodded.

"We'll start with context. Callum is part of the Cult of the Reaper. It was something that didn't impact his day to day life when we were a team, so it never really mattered."

"Like Clive," Jason said. "I don't think he's formally part of whatever organisation they have on this world, but he venerates the great astral being called the Celestial Book."

"Cal's membership in the cult of the Reaper is now very much a factor. At the same time, Melody Jain was part of the Order of the Reaper. Do you understand the difference between the organisations?"

"The cult are the ones who follow the Reaper's principles. The order is an offshoot of the cult that became an order of assassins interested in cultivating backroom political power. They split off from the cult as they increasingly moved away from its core principles."

"Yes," Arabelle said. "The story begins with Melody Jain, around a quarter of a century ago, in the city of Kurdansk. This part comes from what Callum claims Melody told him herself, from before Melody and Callum knew one another. They were each members of their respective organisations, both of which operated in secret. The Order of the Reaper was in the midst of bringing centuries of planning to fruition, and they were very particular about whom they brought into the fold. Melody was highly capable and from one of the old order families, so she was completely welcome. The man she chose for herself was not, however."

"This isn't Callum we're talking about, is it?"

“No. We’re talking about Sophie Wexler’s father, although his name was not Wexler, then. Melody kept him a secret from the order, along with the fact that they had a child. But when the child was still small, they were discovered. The Order of the Reaper specialises in infiltrating people into organisations unnoticed. With religions, it's essentially impossible to fake, but many religions have low-level administrative staff for their endeavours that aren't required to be deeply faithful. Someone working for the Church of Fertility in their record-keeping discovered the details of how the church had helped Melody have a child without her order overseers realising.”

“What were the repercussions?”

“According to Callum, Melody was certain that the order would kill her secret husband and child. This was especially true if they discovered that Melody had been teaching him the order’s method of fighting for years.”

“A method he eventually passed on to Sophie.”

“Yes. Melody was warned that the order had discovered her family by a woman named Marta Fries; a fellow member and Melody’s best friend. Melody had Marta smuggle her husband and daughter away, with even Melody herself not knowing where they went. She did not want to be captured and be forced to divulge where her family was so that the order could tie up loose ends. Even Marta Fries wasn’t certain, having supplied the secret husband with just enough information and resources to disappear on his own.”

“Thus, Sophie and her father wound up in Greenstone. Sophie doesn't have many coherent memories before adventurers found her in that shipwreck.”

“She was young. Didn’t even know that her real name is not Wexler, but Jain. It’s possible her father muddled her memories, somehow. Alchemy can be effective on children that young. There are potions used to help children move past traumatic events, although I try to avoid using them. When treating children, some horrors are best put aside, but the effect of the missing memories can linger, and be harder to deal with for their absence.”

“I have to wonder how much of this, and what version of it, that Melody has told Sophie,” Jason wondered. “They’ve been talking for weeks, and I imagine it must have come up.”

“You didn’t ask her?”

“If Sophie feels like there is something I should know,” Jason said, “she’ll tell me.”

“It has all been happening inside your cloud house. Couldn’t you listen in?”

“I could, but I don't. I know they're talking, but I put my attention elsewhere.”

“I’m not sure I could resist that temptation.”

"It's not hard. You just have to decide if you want to be the person that encroached on the most private moments of a close friend."

"Ah," Arabelle said. "Letting the realisation that you would be a terrible person douse the curiosity."

"Exactly. Now, you've told me about how Sophie ended up in Greenstone, but not where Callum comes in."

"After getting her family out," Arabelle explained, "she knew that the Order of the Reaper would not let it go. They were obsessed with not leaving threads that could cause problems for them later, especially with their plans within decades of going into motion."

"And of all the places Sophie and her father could end up, they went to Greenstone? A place where a part of the Order of the Reaper's plan was set to play out?"

"Callum didn't know why they went there. It might have been an attempt to hide where the order wouldn't look. It could have been coincidence. The order was initiating their re-emergence in locations all across the world, after all."

"So, after getting her family out, she ran?"

"Yes. And this is where Callum finally appears."

"She went to the Cult of the Reaper."

"Yes. But the cult was not going to just take her in. The order was known for its painstaking infiltration of other organisations over the last several centuries, after all. They faked the demise of their entire order as part of a plan more than half a millennia in the making."

"But that secret isn't so well hidden anymore."

"No. Their plan was always to return to their original status of being an open secret, playing tool to those in power while pulling the levers of power themselves. The first time they were too crude and got crushed. This time they are being more patient, and planning things out for the start. In just the few years you were absent they've made massive strides in this regard. And the way they've been trying to establish themselves is through making themselves invaluable. They've made critical strikes against the Church of Purity, the Cult of the Builder and other imminent threats."

"Meaning that when the rest of the world was scrambling after these enemies that blindsided most of us, the Order of the Reaper had already infiltrated them and knew what they were up to. But instead of warning people, they allowed these groups to become threats, so that they would look good by striking against those threats."

"Yes."

"But surely people saw through that?"

“Of course. But the fact remains that it was an impressive display of power. Who is to say how many infiltrators the order has, in what organisations? Anyone moving against them could easily find that someone they trusted is suddenly putting a knife in their back. We also believe that they knew about the messengers and are going to make moves against them to further cement themselves.”

“This all sounds like trouble.”

“Yes. And the Cult of the Reaper was amongst the first to realise that their former offshoot order was once again on the move, although they themselves were difficult to infiltrate. Like religious orders, authentic veneration of a great astral being is a requirement in the astral cults. It’s not as reliable as faith for a god, but it’s impossible to get around, long-term. Too easy to get unlucky.”

“But the order was trying to infiltrate the cult anyway, yes? And then comes Melody, with a seemingly convenient offer to defect. But the cult didn’t trust her.”

“They did not. This is the point where she met Callum. Our team had stopped actively adventuring, with Emir becoming a treasure hunter, while Gabriel and I took on less active roles while we raised our son. I moved from a field healer to a mental health specialist, and Gabriel started teaching at the academy. Callum, we thought, was off hunting monsters in the drive to reach diamond. That isn’t the usual path, but it made sense for him.”

“Hunting monsters isn’t the way to rank up at gold?”

“It’s a part, but not everything. You will learn more as you draw closer to gold-rank. For now, such questions are a distraction. The point is that while Callum was, indeed, out hunting dangerous prey, it was not occupying anywhere near as much of his time as we thought.”

“He became more active in the Cult of the Reaper?”

“Yes, as it turns out, and he was made Melody’s handler. They worked together for years, both investigating the order she came from and using the skills they taught her for the cult’s purposes. They never truly accepted her, however, always wary of the patience and long-term planning of the order. They kept her at a remove, with Callum being her only real connection. She would have left, except that, by that point, she would have both the Order of the Reaper and the Cult of the Reaper coming after her.”

“And that was when she and Callum got together?”

“No,” Arabelle said. “According to Cal, it was one-sided. Melody herself wanted to go find her husband and daughter, but she couldn’t while under the cult’s thumb. So, Callum agreed to help her. He made a connection between Emir and a diamond-ranker friendly to the cult. A historian who had been digging up details of the Order of the Reaper, unaware

they were still active. This man's patronage is why Emir has been looking for Order of the Reaper remnants for years, around his other treasure-hunting activities. It's why he largely employs external forces, like contracting adventurers. It leaves him to use his own people for other projects."

"Adventurers like Farrah, Rufus and Gary," Jason said.

"Yes. He knew they were looking for some independence, and the low-magic of Greenstone seemed perfect."

"That's fine, but how would all that help Callum and Melody?"

"Because Emir and his patron were looking for traces of the order, including their martial techniques, the Way of the Reaper."

"Yeah, he was collecting the skill books. I thought he just wanted them for his granddaughter."

"It was more than that. The skill books are the methodology of the Order of the Reaper we know the most about. The order's members use skill books to inculcate its vast array of techniques, then training to naturalise that information."

"Exactly what I did with Rufus' help."

"Yes. It was just a part of what they were doing, but it was what Callum and Melody actually wanted. Cal knew that between the diamond-ranker and Emir, they would have people scouring the world for traces of the Way of the Reaper. Skill books were one thing, but Melody never had the opportunity to teach her husband that way. If some random guy not attached to the order was found using their techniques, that would stand out. Callum was regularly keeping in contact with his old team member, so he could learn all about what Emir was up to."

"That's a terrible search method," Jason said. "That's knowing that somewhere in the world is a haystack with a needle in it and getting someone to check haystacks for something else, in the hope they'd stumble on a needle."

"Yes," Arabelle agreed. "It was a terrible plan, but one that they could carry out without either the cult or Emir realising what was going on."

"Cal didn't trust Emir?"

"Melody didn't. So they did what they could, knowing full well that they might never find them, and even if it did, it would take years. Even with the formidable search resources that Emir and his diamond-rank patron were able to put into play."

"Oh," Jason said with sudden realisation. "Melody didn't have many options beyond what she could get Cal to do. And Cal was in love with her, so he wasn't wildly invested in finding her long-lost husband."

“No. Cal said that he did genuinely attempt to find the man, but had no real expectations of finding him.”

“Then Sophie must have come as a shock.”

“Yes, but Callum didn’t realise what Emir had found until Emir started using her as bait for the order. Sophie and Emir had managed to find Marta Fries, Melody’s friend, who had helped her and her family escape the order’s grasp. That was when he intervened to keep Sophie and Humphrey away from her. Using Constance’s concerns over Emir using them made a good cover for his own intentions, and he tracked down Fries himself after she fled Humphrey and Sophie arriving at her door.”

“But Melody was already in the Order of Redeeming Light by then, wasn’t she? She’s been in the Sea of Storms for years, and other places before that.”

“Yes,” Arabelle said. “Going back to when Callum first hatched this plan, using one of the Cult of the Reaper’s diamond-rank contacts drew the attention of the cult. They decided it was time for Melody to make a sufficiently momentous gesture that the cult would be willing to accept her, and finally let her move from the Order of the Reaper to the Cult of the Reaper.”

“Infiltrate the Purity church?”

“Yes. Callum was against using her to infiltrate the Order of Redeeming Light, but it was what the cult required. The cult had been looking into the Order of Redeeming Light for some time and suspected that despite serving Purity, they were using necromancy to raise undead. Part of the Order of Redeeming Light’s mandate to repurpose the tools of the unclean to serve Purity.”

“That sounds like a bunch of crap. The whole redeeming light thing only came along after the real Purity was given to boot, right?”

“That is our understanding, but the cult doesn’t care who is behind it, only that undead are being used. The cult often works with the Church of Death in this regard, as they are closely aligned. The church does more public-facing things for the cult, while the cult can be the church’s hidden dagger.”

“So, the Order of Redeeming Light was known for accepting people outside the Purity faithful.”

“They did so exclusively, in fact. It seemed like a rare chance to get a foot in the Purity door.”

“Except that Melody was subjected to this ‘cleansing fire’ or whatever it was they called it. She became an artificial zealot.”

“Yes. Callum lost track of her when she stopped reporting in and has been trying to find her ever since. Sophie and Emir leading him to Melody’s friend Marta Fries was the first real lead he had. Fries been doing the same thing as him in seeking out Melody's trail, while trying to avoid the Order of the Reaper's suspicions about her. Ever since Melody's defection, she had been under scrutiny. Together, pooling their information and resources, they were able to trace Melody to the Sea of Storms. Then you arrived and we’re all caught up.”

Jason leaned back in his chair.

“Well,” he said. “You did warn me it was going to be complicated.”

“And that is only Callum’s side. I’ll be interested in hearing Melody’s. I confess, however, that I am unsure how to proceed with the wellbeing of both in mind. Melody isn’t truly capable of making informed choices while still under the influence of whatever was done to her. Perhaps we can’t move forward until we see if Carlos can figure out how to undo this mess.”

“On Earth,” Jason said, “when you are unable to make your own informed decisions for whatever reason, that power generally falls to the closest family member.”

“It works much the same here, although house politics often comes into play with nobility. You’re saying that we bring in Sophie to see what she thinks.”

“It’s her mother. It seems only right that she make decisions until Melody can make her own without an evil god sitting on her shoulder.”