

Chapter 622

A Responsibility as Much as a Privilege

“There is an option,” Jason told Arabelle. “Something I’ve discussed with Carlos before. There is a place where things that aren’t usually possible become possible. Somewhere I can turn off what’s been done to Melody, so long as she is there. Removing it would kill her the moment she left that place, but suppressing it should be safe enough.”

“You’re talking about your soul space,” Arabelle said.

“Yes.”

“I know there have been changes. And I know that we’ve barely talked about them.”

“Some things I’m not even sure how to talk about. I’ve seen glimpses of some higher society that exists in the wider cosmos. Soramir Rimaros, and I’m presuming many other diamond rankers have seen it. Dawn is someone important there. She’s told me snippets; tales of a great city with visitors from a million universes. That wider cosmos has reached into the worlds in which I exist, changing me in different ways. Mentally, physically, magically. I’ve been annihilated and remade multiple times. My soul is unrecognisable from what it was.”

“You’re describing changes,” Arabelle said, “but how changed do you feel? Do you find yourself to be a fundamentally different person from when you were human?”

“I’m different, but that’s true of anyone. We all become different people over time.”

“Then it’s a question of whether you, yourself, have changed, or if outside forces changed you?”

“It’s not a question. The answer is both, but that’s still true for everyone else. I just think that my ratio might have been tipped a little in favour of external forces. But the closer I come to those forces, the more I realise that I’ve barely caught a glimpse of a realm to which I increasingly belong. There are aspects of myself that belong to that greater cosmic society. I’ve got one foot out into the cosmos, with no idea what I’m stepping into.”

“And with the departure of Dawn, the closest thing you have to a guide is gone.”

“Yes. The closest thing I have now is Soramir Rimaros, and I don’t trust him. I don’t distrust him, but he’s not Dawn. Or Farrah, or you, or anyone else that I truly trust and rely on.”

“How much does Soramir know?”

“I’m not sure. Enough to hurt me, although I think he’s well-meaning. It’s hard keeping secrets around diamond-rankers.”

“Why did you bring this up?” Arabelle asked. “Are you concerned about stumbling into something by using these cosmic aspects of yourself? By which I assume you mean the changes to your soul space.”

“Yes. I don’t know if my concerns are valid or if I’m jumping at shadows.”

“Are you considering leaving your soul space alone until you know more?”

“No. One thing I’m very certain of is that I need to use every advantage I can, even if that sometimes comes with a cost. Right now, that means using my soul space to try and help Carlos.”

“You think you can help him heal Sophie’s mother and the others?”

“I hope so. If he can reach a certain point, I might be able to get him over the line.”

“But you think you can help Melody now, if only temporarily.”

“I believe I can help the real Melody to emerge, so long as I can get her through the portal to my soul space.”

“I thought the restrictions on that portal were gone?”

“Yes, the trust restrictions are gone, but it’s still a portal. You can’t force anyone through without consent.”

“Then the question becomes whether Melody will concede to go through some strange portal.”

“Yes.”

“I would advise you to consider this more carefully before moving forward, especially before taking this idea to Sophie. If you build her hopes up beyond what you can deliver, it could do real damage.”

“I’m not rushing into anything.”

“Good,” Arabelle said, nodding her approval. “Even if this is something that you can do, it doesn’t mean you should. You cannot expect to suppress the malicious magic affecting Melody and have her just be fine afterwards,” Arabelle warned. “You know better than most that after the soul trauma is repaired, the mental trauma lingers. Especially since she will know that to leave your soul space is to return to her afflicted state.”

Jason winced.

“That’s a horrible thought. Knowing that you’re about to be taken over by something else.”

“Thus, I counsel caution.”

“I was going to discuss this idea with Sophie. Would you help me figure out how to do that? Even do it with me?”

“I will.”

“We don’t need to go rushing into it,” Jason said. “We can take the time to make considered choices, even if we’re left with nothing but hope that they’re the right ones.”

Arabelle narrowed her eyes at Jason.

“You’ve embraced the idea of moving forward slowly, haven’t you?”

“Should I not have?”

“You absolutely should. But you’ve been running from one crisis to another for long enough that I thought it would take more adjustment.”

Jason chuckled.

“Slowing down is what I’ve been dreaming of for a while. I was so ready for this.”

“Alright,” Arabelle said, standing up. “Try to maintain that attitude; you’re not getting any older. Ever.”

The giant bus Carlos was using for the trip was not as big as Jason’s hover yacht, but it was still inconveniently bulky. Even so, space inside was at a premium. Despite placing most of the Order of Redeeming Light members in stasis and efficiently racking them, space was still required for Carlos and his three assistants, also from the Church of the Healer, to live and conduct their research.

A large consumer of usable area was Gibson Amouz, whose father had supplied the vehicle to facilitate his son's recovery. Gibson was inside a large, specialised containment tank, floating unconscious. Carlos had managed to prevent Gibson's degradation following the half-complete 'purification' ritual the Order of redeeming Light had performed. He hoped that Gibson was the key to helping the others and, in a perfect world, many more besides. Gibson Amouz was potentially the key to unravelling such seemingly permanent curses as lesser vampirism, if Carlos could crack the nature of his affliction.

Carlos was sat at a desk covered in intricate notes. He ran his hands over his exhausted face, stood up and grabbed an umbrella on his way to the door. He opened it, seeing the pounding rain he’d been listening to strike the vehicle’s rigid panels all day. The only windows were for the driver at the front, so this was his first time seeing the wall of falling water.

Unlike Jason’s yacht, his vehicle couldn’t fly using power drawn from the astral, so it was parked between the road and the jungle. Carlos chose not to walk, and instead floated out over the mud. Levitation was easy enough, so long as he wasn’t disturbed, being easier for a gold ranker than a silver. His umbrella generated a water-repelling field and floated on its own, like one Jason once owned. He had left his with his niece on Earth.

The air outside was wet and heavy in the pounding rain, rather than fresh as Carlos wanted. He unnecessarily breathed it in anyway, trying to clear a mind caught up in his project. He needed to untangle his thoughts before proceeding, his head feeling like a clogged pipe. The importance of his current project was adding an extra layer of pressure.

Amos Pensinata floated down from the cloud yacht, apparently not caring as he was drenched in rain. He landed next to Carlos, his heavy boots settling in the mud that Carlos was avoiding. They stood side by side, watching the traffic backed up from the city gate, which had only gotten worse as the day progressed.

Carlos absently wondered what the stoic man had been like before Carlos had met him all those years ago, in a lunatic's dungeon. Probably the same, if his equally stolid nephew was anything to go by. Now that they were away from Rimaros, Amos was no longer projecting a politely restrained aura, and was instead hiding it away completely. Asano's friend Dawn had done well in recruiting Amos, as Carlos knew very few others who even could teach Jason about aura manipulation. There were people with stronger auras at the high end of gold rank and beyond. Strength was a different thing from skill, however, and like Jason, Amos was more than raw power.

"Have you started working with Asano yet?" Carlos.

Amos shook his head.

"You think you can show him some things?"

Amos nodded.

"You and I should sit down and discuss some things about Asano and his aura. There are some quirks that you'll need to know. His body and soul are a single entity, like a messenger's. It means he has the potential to do the same things they can."

Nod.

"You've fought messengers?"

Amos nodded, looked contemplative and then to look at Carlos.

"I don't have time for day-drinking," Carlos said. "I'm just clearing my head. I need to complete this first stage of my research as quickly as possible. If we can start working out how to treat the Amouz boy, that opens up a world of possibility."

Carlos looked out from under his umbrella at the rain hammering on the road, the vehicles traversing it, and on Amos.

"This rainy season came out of nowhere," Carlos said. "It feels like it'll never let up."

Amos shrugged, prompting Carlos to lean towards the edge of his umbrella's coverage and look up.

"This afternoon? I don't see it."

Amos made an uncertain gesture with his hand.

"I'd be nice, even if it was a little break," Carlos said. "This rain feels oppressive. Makes a break like this not so refreshing."

Amos shrugged.

"Booze won't help, as you damn well know."

A smile teased at the corners of Amos' mouth.

"Fine, booze won't help me. If you want to get sauced in the middle of the day, that's your business. I suppose you're living a bit of a lazy life at the moment. Any time you aren't teaching Asano or looking out for your nephew, you've got nothing but time, in a luxurious boat made of clouds. What are you going to do with yourself?"

"There's always work to be done," Amos said in his gravel slurry voice.

"What work will you do on a luxury yacht?"

"Read. Train. Drink."

"In that order?" Carlos asked with a grin.

Amos' friendly chuckle was the sound people heard in dark alleys in their nightmares.

"You're going to get back into a training routine? Chasing after essence revelation again?"

Amos nodded.

"I suppose you've got the time to focus on meditation. I don't think I'll ever shoot for diamond. It's too hard when you came up using cores; I'm lucky I got to gold."

Amos gave him a look.

"Don't give me that," Carlos complained. "I know that anything you don't try is impossible, but I'm trying to cure vampirism here. Maybe let me attempt one impossible thing at a time."

The city of Rajoras sprawled inland from the coast, built around the estuary of a broad river, the Rajo. It was a major manufacturing hub for water and air vehicles, and the seat of House de Varco. This made it the perfect place for Korinne and her team to find a vehicle of their own for their time on the road. They needed something that could serve as a true world-traveller, up to the rigours of intercontinental travel, along with being a robust home for adventurers.

Korinne's team was gathered in a vehicle warehouse the size of a sports stadium, filled with various bus-like vehicles. They had been looking over different vehicles that various members of the team had been excited about for one reason or another. Korinne was yet to find something she was satisfied with, matching Orin's taciturn expression.

Whether or not Orin found something exciting remained a mystery to his team. He might not have the enhanced aura strength of Jason or his uncle, but Amos had trained his aura manipulation skills personally. Unless someone of higher rank started poking his aura, it revealed no more emotions than his blank face.

The staff member guiding the team around showed no distaste at the team's lack of unity in what they wanted from a vehicle.

"When looking for a vessel that will not just be a vehicle but a home," he said, "it's important to take your time to make the right choice. Have you considered something larger, with the capacity to meet all of your needs? There are many excellent options that fall well within your stated budget."

"No," Korinne said. "A soft environment fosters a soft will. We're travelling to train as adventures, honing ourselves to a knife's edge. We need a scabbard, not a cushion. This isn't a leisure tour."

"Couldn't it be both?" asked Rosa, the team scout.

"No," Korinne said. "Orin, what do you have to say on the issue?"

"My uncle is a hard man," Orin said.

"Exactly," Korinne said before the slow-spoken Orin could continue. "Amos Pensinata is an exceptional role model. A hard adventurer needs hard surroundings. Flint and steel. Oh, what about this one?"

The vehicle she was pointing at was the size and shape of a bread truck.

"Ah," the salesman said. "The War Band model, from House de Varco. It was designed as a budget-conscious troop transport, but it does have the option of a long-term travel configuration, with accommodation features and enhanced long-distance travel features, such as more efficient flight. It's an excellent choice for one or two adventurers, but can, strictly speaking, be set up for as many as eight. This is by replacing two bed-and-cupboard configurations this one has with racks of what aren't bunks so much as shelves. It's workable if you're silver rank and can float into the higher slots. You just can't stand more than about three people plus, plus two seated in the driver station."

"What do you mean, can't stand?" Kalif asked.

"You have to remove the seating room and the storage to fit the bunk racks," the salesman explained. "We put in a rack a rack for hanging dimensional bags. Or we will; we haven't actually sold any of that configuration, yet. But, as I said, two people can sit in the driving station at the front."

"Oh, that's fine, then," Kalif said. "There's only six of us, and two can even sit in comfort."

"I didn't say comfort," the salesman hurriedly corrected. "You can't hold me to that."

"I want to see inside," Korinne said.

"I don't," Rosa said.

"Are you kidding?" Kalif asked.

"It costs nothing to look," the salesman said. "Let me just open it up. The current configuration is for two, and it's probably best to avoid more than two or three in there at once. It's a little snug."

"I think it's perfect," Korinne said, once she was inside. "All business, no indulgence."

"I'm not above a little indulgence," Rosa said, crammed in with Korinne and the salesman. "Somewhere to sit down, for example. Somewhere to eat."

"Indulgence makes you weak," Korinne told her. "If you have time to sit down and eat, you have time to consume a spirit coin while you train."

"You do realise the monster surge ended, right?" Kalif said, poking his head in from outside. "We made a pretty good showing for ourselves."

"Pretty good," Korinne said. "You think the messengers will let you live because you put up a pretty good struggle?"

"Korinne," Kalif said, "you've been extremely militant ever since the Builder attacked Rimaros. While I agree that diligent training and discipline is good for us, so is getting to relax from time to time. If a rope is constantly pulled taught, it's going to fray."

"I agree," Rosa said. "I know you're the team leader, Korinne, and we've been following your lead, but Kalif is right. The monster surge is over, so it's time to loosen up and enjoy what we've earned. Even if it's only a little bit."

"Adventuring is a responsibility as much as a privilege," Korinne told her.

"Exactly," Rosa said. "We've had almost half a year of responsibility and it's time to enjoy a little privilege. The occasional hot meal won't turn us into lazy degenerates."

"Actual food," Kalif said longingly.

"Having a place to sit down won't turn us into failed adventurers, Korinne," Rosa continued, gesturing at the vehicle around them as much as she could in the available space. "This is a can for storing food, not adventurers."

"Orin," Kalif said. "Would your uncle stay in Korinne's tiny metal box?"

"My uncle is a hard man," Orin said again, "but he likes soft beds."

Clive and Belinda watched as a submarine was disassembled at a dry dock by a team of professional shipwrights.

“We’re not going to feed the components to the cloud flask here are we?” Clive asked.

“No,” Jason's voice came from Clive's shadow, courtesy of Shade hidden inside it. It was the Shade body that had driven the stolen submarine upriver and into the dock.

“We’ll need to make sure that no individual part exceeds our storage space limit, then,” Clive said. “You’ll need to take the bigger parts, Belinda.”

Each storage space power differed in size and weight allowance for any given object. Clive's power had the lowest capacity on the team but also the strongest other functions. Its bronze-rank effect was to open portals, while at silver it could fuel rituals in areas normally too low-magic for them. Belinda's storage was the largest, and while its other abilities were useful, they weren’t portal useful.

“Shade,” Clive asked. “How did a familiar sneak a submarine stolen from the Order of Redeeming Light through the river checkpoint without the Magic Society or the Adventure Society getting up in arms about it? And where did you get the paperwork for this job to be approved?”

“Miss Belinda made the arrangements.”

Clive turned to Belinda.

“What?” she asked.

“How did you manage that?”

“Do you remember when I asked about how easy it was to bribe the people here?”

“Yes.”

“It was an act. I already knew.”

“But we hadn’t even gotten here yet?”

“You’re right,” Belinda agreed. “We hadn’t.”