

Chapter 566

Something Drastic

Slipping Belinda into the ranks of the Order of Redeeming Light had been almost startlingly easy. The order had not anticipated the Adventure Society sending a response to the mining complex so quickly and their teams had been caught by surprise. A number of the teams had scattered after coming out of the wrong side of skirmishes, sacrificing the pure converted to cover their escape.

Jason and his team had encountered a pair of such order members early in their descent into the facility. They had eliminated both, but Shade identified one of the pair as an ideal identity for Belinda to assume. Having infiltrated their headquarters himself, he was familiar with their personnel to varying degrees through his diligent gathering of information.

His information on the leadership was as limited as his access to them had been. They had spent most of their time in the more secure areas of the facility and Shade hadn't been willing to risk attempting to infiltrate them. He had also mostly avoided Melody's own team, even those not in leadership positions. This was due to one member of her team, Kelleigh, being someone that Shade was quite wary of.

The people he had been able to gain an ample sense of were the rank and file of the other teams. Normally the order's various cells were kept apart, but the entire order was laying low after the Builder island raid. Since then, they had been hidden in the order's largest secret stronghold, carved from the inside of a mountain and only accessible from underwater. With them all sequestered together, Shade had the opportunity to get a thorough sense of them.

The member of the order that Shade identified as ideal for Belinda to replace was a good choice for several reasons. One was that she had been separated from the order in the upper levels, making it easier for them to regroup when the order made for the exit. Much more important was the nature of the member in question, whose name was Keth Gino.

One of the things Shade had noted about order members was that whatever process the flames of purification entailed, it had varying effects on physiology and mentality from person to person. Melody, for example, had undergone significant physical changes in going from a celestine to a human. The most visible changes were her hair and eyes, once metallic silver like her daughter's. Melody's hair had turned a milky white, while her eyes had turned grey.

On the other hand, Shade suspected that Melody's strong personality and sharp mind were largely unchanged from before the process, with only her core motivations shifting. Compared to that, many members of the order were impacted mentally to a large degree. Even staying just a few days with the order was enough for that to be clear to Shade.

On one end of the mentally impacted scale were Melody, the other leaders and some members like Rhett, Jaime and Kelleigh, who retained their full faculties. Others ranged from rigid-thinkers lacking in creativity, which could just be natural, to almost drone-like. All of the Builder's converted were hard set at the drone end of the spectrum, while the EOA converted from Earth were more like the order in that the results varied wildly.

Keth Gino was deep on the drone end of the mentality scale. She showed zero initiative, followed orders and only spoke when spoken to, if then. What made her especially valuable was that she was often found wandering aimlessly, like a sleepwalker with no purpose. She was one of several of the who displayed a mentality very similar to the pure converted who were turned using purified clockwork cores.

The lack of personality and initiative, along with a proclivity for wandering, made Keth Gino the perfect role for Belinda to inhabit. She could keep her mouth shut, her ears open and not be expected to know any information that Shade wouldn't be able to supply. If she was found wandering around the enemy stronghold, she would just be overlooked.

Belinda had shape-shifted into Keth, with one of Shade's bodies hidden in her shadow to provide guidance. She separated from the party, her place on the team taken by Stash. It was a most-likely unnecessary precaution, but as they already knew there were traitors amongst the adventurers, it was best to be careful.

When a pair of also-scattered members of the order encountered Belinda wandering alone, they had her trail along like a lost sibling they had found. The order regrouped and made their way to the dock, where the traitorous team of adventurers left to guard the dock helped them. They did not wait long for more order members to make it back to the dock before taking all the vessels in the dock and departing.

Most of the groups managed to make it, either collectively or as stragglers came in, and they did not wait long before making their escape. Belinda got the feeling that the leaders who had been at the dock were as much worried about Melody returning to the dock as more adventurers. The unfortunate intervention of the adventurers was more than enough excuse to leave her to them.

Belinda kept her face and aura blank of emotion, which was the best part of taking on the role of Keth. The drone woman was an emotional blank slate; much easier to replicate than a complex person. The hardest part was standing by as the order killed a couple of

civilians who made trouble. Belinda was unsure if she could have kept up the emotionless ruse if she'd been ordered to kill innocent people. She'd have done it, or it would have been her head, but she was not sure she could hide her emotions while doing so.

Belinda had been treated like the handful of pure converted not sacrificed by the order members and she was shuffled onto one of the transports. That had been the true point of no return as she was sealed inside, with no way of communicating or even knowing where the transport was taking them. While her assumed identity made eavesdropping easy, it was out of character to ask questions herself.

The sense of oppressive isolation didn't change when they arrived at the mountain stronghold. The magical defences that blocked senses in both directions made her feel boxed in.

The order was a mess in the wake of their disastrous expedition, although the two leaders who had made it out, Marika and Elise, seemed satisfied. The combination of a stolen resource transport filled with materials and the absence of Melody seemed to make them both happy. She could tell they were already eyeing each other off over who would end up in charge; a leadership conflict was an asset she could potentially make use of.

Belinda wandered off in the chaos to Keth's designated dormitory, where she could pause and take stock without coming across as suspicious. Most of the order members remained at the stronghold submarine dock, still reeling from the generally disastrous result of the mining complex raid.

"Should we try and act now while everything is in chaos?" Belinda asked. "This might be our best chance to poke around places maybe we shouldn't without being noticed.

"No," Shade told her. "The blank-minded order members prone to wandering always do so when things are calmer, often while the others are sleeping. When things are raucous, they tend to go to their dormitories and stay out of the way. They've been trained to do that by the others."

"Like a pet put in its box so it doesn't get underfoot," Belinda observed.

"Just so. Patience will serve us well here and..."

"Shade?"

"I think something may have happened to Mr Asano," he said. "Something drastic."

"I didn't think you could sense your other bodies or Jason from here," Belinda said.

"I cannot," Shade confirmed. "Beyond a base sense that the connection is there, no information should be able to pass through it. The fact that any sensation at all made it through suggests that Mr Asano's circumstances, whatever they might be, are quite extraordinary."

Intellectually, Liara Rimaros understood why she had been explicitly instructed not to personally participate in the rescue operation in the mining complex. Her abilities were ill-suited to the task and her emotional investment would not be an asset. Gold-rankers were not accustomed to being told no, even by the director of the Adventure Society, which is why he had recruited the diamond-rank Zila Rimaros to tell her no for him. It was the kind of option only the monster surge made possible and he was grateful for it.

Liara was assuaged by managing the operation from the Rimaros side. Officially, she had been using the team that had been guarding the dock for communication. One of their members, like Jason, had a multi-body familiar that could be used to communicate over vast distances. This was the excuse Liara had used to specifically assign the traitorous team to guard the docks, giving the Order of Redeeming Light a pathway to escape.

Keeping an eye on discovered traitors rather than exposing them was a favourite strategy of Liara's. It did take care to manage, especially with multiple groups on the go, but the payoff when using those assets effectively was immense. It had allowed her to capture her first Order of Redeeming Light prisoners, even if she had admittedly been hunting for Builder cultists, by leaking information about Jason Asano.

In this instance, it would hopefully allow the Adventure Society to strike a definitive blow to the order, at least for their operation in the Sea of Storms. Belinda had undertaken a huge risk in attempting to infiltrate the enemy base, and had been preparing should an opportunity arise. Her team had enthusiastically encouraged her to back out of the plan, and while Liara had done the same, she was confident her lack of sincerity had been seen through.

The presence of Shade bodies in the mining complex dock and Liara's own shadow had allowed her to keep tabs on events and see exactly what the traitors were telling her, versus what was actually happening. The traitors were away, Belinda with them and apparently undetected, although Liara, of all people, knew it could be part of a deeper game.

Once the traitors were gone, Shade approached Korinne Pescos so that Liara could communicate with her directly and better manage events remotely. The arrival of the gold-rankers was a relief but she still awaited word of her husband. The news that the facility had been sabotaged was a mixed blessing, as it complicated the operation but suggested Baseph was still alive. She was confident that if the sabotage was successfully enacted, he would be the one behind it. Probably complaining the whole time about safety features that he, himself, introduced.

"Princess Liara," Shade said, his voice measured and calm as ever. "I would appreciate the immediate dispatch of a healer who can repair damage on the core matrix level and the strongest mana-drainer you have access to Mr Asano's cloud house."

"What happened?"

"Mr Asano managed to extract his team, your husband and a large number of civilians via portal, but the after-effects of having done so are destroying him."

"How is that... never mind, that can wait. RODNEY!"

Liara managed to restrain her instincts and not immediately rush to the cloud house with the gold-rankers she recruited. Instead, she continued managing the mining complex evacuation until another Adventure Society official took over. She only stayed long enough to introduce Shade to her as their communication node before rushing outside.

Her assistant had readied a gold-rank flying device, the princess certainly having a flying device permit for Livaros. It was a small, long sky-skimmer of the type Jason likened to *Star Wars* speeder bikes. She shot over the distance between Livaros and Arnote, warning off monsters attracted by the speed with aura blasts filled with her pent-up, frustrated rage.

It was not hard to pick out the picturesque town on the shores of the lagoon for the air, but that was wholly unnecessary. She spotted the periodic rainbow sky beams well before she reached the island. She spotted a crowd gathered around Asano's cloud house, which had been replaced with some manner of black temple. Blue and orange lights shone from a ritual being performed on an open roof platform.

Liara ignored propriety and sent her aura to sweep over the crowd, although it stopped dead the moment it reached any part of the black temple. To her surprise, the gold-rankers she had sent were outside, but their auras were not what she was searching for. She sensed her husband, exhausted and radiating guilt but healthy. She didn't bother to slow down, leaping from the skimmer at full speed. The skimmer crashed into and through the invisible barrier at the cliff's edge while she crashed into Baseph.

Chapter 567

Ridiculous New Soul Power

Liara's marriage had never been one of great passion. A political arrangement made when she and Baseph were young, their relationship had nonetheless grown over the decades. Friends and often lovers, their true shared love was their children, now grown. Only one of their children was local, having followed his father into the administration of the Amouz family interests. The others were further afield, having followed their mother into the adventuring life.

"Did you let Joseph know I was fine?" Baseph asked Liara after assuring her yet again that he was tired but unharmed.

"I didn't know you were fine," she said. "I rushed here as soon as I could get away. I've been running your rescue operation, although Jason Asano seems to have gone rather drastically off-plan."

Baseph frowned and Liara followed his gaze past the crowd gathered on the lawn to the former cloud house. It was now obvious made from cloud-stuff, but rather than fluffy white it was an ominous black, like storm clouds conjured by an evil god. The shape was no longer that of a house, either, being more like a temple. It was not the look of an ordinary temple, though, but an evil temple from a children's story, all looming walls and pointed spires. Liara had seen the open ritual platform at the top.

The temple had a wide arch in which three people were standing; the only ones setting foot in the temple itself. Liara recognised them all, having kept a tight watch on Jason, his team and the people he came into contact with. Gareth Xandier was a huge leonid, while Taika-Williams was a chocolate-skinned human-turned-outworlder who was possibly even larger. Next to the others, the regular-sized Travis Noble, another human-outworlder, looked downright diminutive.

The rest of the people gathered in front of the building were a mix of shaken-looking civilians, townsfolk and people who had arrived in response to events going on. This included Pelli, the town mayor and distant branch member of the royal family. She was one of three gold-rankers, the others being the people she had sent herself. The gold-rankers were standing in front of the archway leading into the temple.

"Why aren't they going in?" Liara asked Baseph.

"The building won't let them," Baseph said. "Aside from Asano's friends, anyone who goes in has their flesh start to rot and their aura brutally suppressed. It was even affecting

the civilians who were the last to come out, so it's lucky we got the iron-rankers out first. If it affects the gold-rankers, any irons still in there would have died fast."

"You?" Liara asked him, but he shook his head.

"I got out early, to organise the rest."

"What is Asano doing?" Liara asked.

"He's dying, Lee. I didn't really follow the conversation, but whatever he did to get us out, his team only went along with it when there was no other choice. They were fairly certain it would kill him."

No aura whatsoever was emanating from the temple, which was an unnervingly blank spot in Liara's magical senses.

"No one can get in?"

"Anyone can get in. Surviving it is the problem. The gold-rankers tried, but when their flesh started melting, they came out quick, looking shaken."

Liara had sensed the attention of the other gold-rankers. Pelli was organising the civilians, both the looky-loo locals and the mining facility evacuees. The others were waiting for Liara to be done with her husband. She turned back to Baseph, who rolled his eyes.

"I'm fine," he told her. "I need to get onto organising the facility staff, anyway. Everyone is shaken up by what we've been through."

"Aunt Pelli is doing that just fine," Liara said, intertwining her fingers with his. "You're not leaving my side."

"Liara, I'm alright."

"You remember that I can read your emotions, right?"

"I remember you doing so means it's time for one of our conversations about boundaries."

"This is why I want to hurry up and get you to gold rank."

"And I told you there's no rush. You know how I feel about buying that many cores all at once. The price gets ramped up when they have to source that many at once and it's wasteful enough as is."

"You do realise I'm a princess of a fairly prominent kingdom, right?"

"I thought you preferred to earn the things you get?"

She smiled in spite of herself and nodded, then leaned in to kiss his cheek.

"Yes, but what's the point if I don't *occasionally* take advantage? I'm happy you're alive, husband."

“I’d say that’s a low standard,” he told her, “but I’ve met Karen’s husband. There’s a reason he keeps taking jobs in the northern drill pits.”

“Be nice,” she mock-scolded as she moved towards the archway, tugging him along as she refused to let go of his hand. The two gold-rankers turned at her approach. One she was a healer she was only passingly familiar with. The other was a man she knew well; a drain-healer named Nacio Elan. He greeted Liara and Baseph as they approached while his companion glowered in silence.

“Liara. Bas, good to see you safe. Lee, what did you send us off to do? What is going on in this place?”

“I was hoping you could tell me, Nacio,” Liara said. “You’ve been in there, right?”

“Not for long. I didn’t get halfway up the stairs before getting out. There’s only silver-rank magic but something has boosted it like nothing I’ve ever seen. It’s like someone ate a diamond-rank spirit coin, except instead of a person it’s the whole damn building. And what is going on with the aura in there? It feels like the temple to a god of being a controlling asshole.”

“A diamond-rank coin might not be too far off the mark,” Baseph said. “I overheard Asano and his team talking about it. It’s not a diamond-rank coin, but it’s something similar. Whatever it is was powerful enough to let Asano portal out through deep granite. Plus, he took more of us through than he should have been able to.”

“Spirit coins boost your attributes,” Nacio said, “not the parameters of your essence abilities. Not even a diamond-rank coin can do that.”

Baseph went to speak when Shade emerged from Liara’s shadow, to the surprise of the gold-rankers. A silver-rank anything getting that close to them unnoticed, even if they weren’t paying attention was unsettling.

“With respect, Lord Rimaros,” Shade said to Baseph, “I would appreciate if you would refrain from speculating on Mr Asano’s secrets in an open forum.”

“It doesn’t matter what secrets he has if he’s dead,” Liara said.

“That is untrue,” Shade said. “It is also, for the moment, irrelevant.”

“This is Asano’s familiar, Shade,” Liara introduced. “Shade, can you get them inside?”

“Unfortunately not,” Shade said. “Mr Asano is insensible at the moment and the cloud house is reacting reflexively, in accordance with Mr Asano’s level of trust.”

“We can’t go in there,” Nacio said. “Could you bring him out so we can work on him?”

“I am afraid that we have moved past that stage before your arrival,” Shade said, “or we would have done so. I believe that I must apologise for wasting your time in requesting Lady Liara bring you. At this stage, Mr Asano lives or dies by the will of those of us who

stand with him and his stubborn refusal to die, no matter how many times the cosmos sees fit to kill him.”

The gold rankers shared a troubled look. They were not used to being helpless to intervene in anything, let alone the affairs of a silver ranker.

“Bro, they’re talking like we’re not standing right in front of them.”

“Gold-rankers,” Gary agreed, shaking his head.

“Do you think Jason’s going to be alright?” Travis asked.

“Of course he is,” Gary said. “He’ll come out, say something smug and have some ridiculous new soul power. That’s what always happens. I tried mourning him once; total waste of time. Turns out he just went off to visit his mum.”

“Actually, they don’t get on,” Taika said.

The gold-rankers watched Gary, Taika and Travis talk as if they weren’t standing right in front of them. Liara was about to say something when the black hole in their aura senses got very, very full.

Blue and orange light lit up overhead as a tyrannical aura washed out from the temple. The previously silent gold-ranker grunted with distaste.

“Sin auras,” he muttered unhappily. “And people say dragon auras are arrogant.”

The crowd moved back from the walls to get a better look at what was lighting up the sky above. The gold-rankers moved the furthest and fastest with their natural speed, along with Baseph who was pulled behind Liara like a paper streamer. They stopped turned and looked to see a giant, eye-shaped nebula floating over the temple.

“What is that?” Nacio asked.

“It looks like one of Asano’s eyes,” Liara said.

Baseph’s attention, after he recovered from being dragged along by his wife, was focused on the aura now flooding the area, particularly its effect on the lower-ranked civilians. They were visibly unnerved by its tyrannical nature, but it wasn’t demonstrating the destructiveness of a truly uncontrolled aura. Whatever Asano was going through, on some level he was demonstrating constraint.

Even during a monster surge, the airship traffic through Rimaros was heavy. The largest sky port was on Provo, but the one on Livaros was generally considered the most important – at least by people who considered themselves important. Provo was the most populous island and its sky port was one of the most trafficked mercantile hubs in the world. Livaros was the playground of aristocrats and adventurers, with a sky port more accommodating to the vessels of the wealthy than efficient trade haulers. Along with the

regular airships, the sky port boasted more exotic vehicles, such as hollow metal birds the size of private jets.

Carlos Quilido was a humble man by nature, but there was only so humble the world would allow a gold-ranker to be, so the airship he was on was directed to the port at Livaros. Carlos himself was unassuming, in simple clothes of light brown, in a loose cut to breathe in the humid tropical climate. The wet, heavy air would not make the gold-ranker sweat, but it could make him uncomfortable, should he dress inappropriately.

An expert at aura manipulation, Carlos did not stand out through his inherent presence, although the sculpted and unblemished perfection of his looks marked him as a high-ranker. He was a broad-shouldered and swarthy man. The observant would notice the little details that marked him as an adherent of the healer. Subtleties in the cut of his clothes made the loosely-draped suit slightly reminiscent of robes, while certain patterns in the stitching had meaning to those versed in the right religious texts.

Passenger travel was uncommon during a monster surge, especially for a gold-ranker. Anything worth dispatching a gold-ranker for was usually worth organising a portal for. Carlos was a healer, but in an extremely specialty field. It was not a field that usually required urgency, so he was more used to travelling around at a more sedate pace than might be expected of an adventurer, which he was not. He had spent his share of time in the field, but he was a priest and a core user, not a combat expert.

Carlos primarily served the Healer by helping those suffering soul-harm, body matrix damage and other related cases not easily healed through ordinary restoration magic. He usually worked with individuals or small groups for weeks or even months at a time. A key component of his work was researching the field so that others might be more readily helped in the future.

Despite his work being very far from that of an adventurer, a gold-ranker was still a gold-ranker. As he made his way to his latest destination, he had stepped up more than once as monsters approached his vessel, although no fights took place. A directed burst of his gold-rank aura was sufficient to warn off silver-rank monsters and they had been fortunate enough to not attract any golds. This had allowed the trip to go uneventfully, his fellow passengers never even realising they were under threat. The exquisite aura control Carlos had made the entire process go wholly unnoticed by the sky ship's passengers and crew.

The airship docked at the sky port, attaching itself to a tunnel jutting from the side of one of the enormous docking towers. Carlos was about to disembark along the passenger tunnel when he sensed a pair of familiar auras rising up from below the airship.

A small flying skiff appeared alongside the skyship. Onboard were Arabelle Remore, whom Carlos had worked with many times, along with her son, Rufus. The boy had been bronze-rank last time they met, in a provincial city where Carlos had spent time working with a very unusual case. And for him, that was saying something.

Along with a pilot for the skiff, there was a third person on board; a woman he did not know whose aura marked her both as an adventurer and an outworlder. Given the special case connected to Rufus Remore involved a different outworlder, his curiosity was piqued.

“Arabelle,” he said with a big smile. “You could have waited until I was at least off the boat.”

“No time,” she said. “Get on.”

Carlos hopped lightly aboard and Arabelle nodded at the pilot, who immediately set out.

“I didn’t think they let these little vessels roam around the docks like this,” Carlos said.

“They don’t,” Arabelle said. “Special dispensation.”

“I see.”

Carlos shook Rufus’ hand. With his expertise in the mental health field, Carlos picked out a little emotional scarring in the boy’s aura but nothing drastic; it was an old wound. It had been fresh the last time Carlos had seen him, shortly after losing a team member. He was much-recovered, which was unsurprising given his mother’s expertise in mental health. The interrelatedness of their fields was the reason Carlos and Arabelle had worked together many times, especially since she reached gold rank and spent far less time adventuring.

“It’s been a while, Rufus,” Carlos said. “Congratulations on ranking up.”

“Thank you, sir,” Rufus said.

Carlos then turned his attention to the outworlder; a woman with strawberry blonde hair who seemed slight at a glance, but a careful eye picked out compact muscle.

“I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure. I am Carlos Quilido, priest of the Healer.”

“Farrah Hurin,” she said. “I’m more about the other side of the business.”

“The other side?”

“Putting people in need of healing.”

“Ah.”

Gold-rankers had excellent memories and something was teasing at Carlos' mind. Where had he heard that name before? Then he remembered, his gaze moving to Rufus and then back at Farrah. It was not just Arabelle that had helped Rufus along.

“You’re Mr Remore’s dead team member,” Carlos said to Farrah.

“No,” she said. “I’m Mr Remore’s team member that died. There’s a small but crucial difference.”

“Quite so,” Carlos agreed. “You rather remind me of someone else of Mr Remore’s acquaintance. He was also an outworlder.”

“Still is,” Rufus said. “We’re heading to him now, in fact.”

“We suspect he is going to need your help,” Arabelle said. “Should he survive.”

“Survive?” Carlos asked. He turned a contemplative look on Farrah, another outworlder who, by all accounts, had passed away. “He’s also back from the dead?”

“A few times, since you met him,” Farrah told him. “It never sticks. He comes back from the dead so much he brought me with him one time for laughs.”

“I see,” Carlos said. “Actually, I don’t, but imagine I’ll catch up.”

Chapter 568

The Awakening of Mr Asano

Under the sense-suppressing hood, Melody shouldn't have been able to sense anything. Even the oppressive aura pervading the strange cloud building had been cut off once the hood was yanked back over her head. So when that aura punched through the hood, stronger than ever, it was a startling experience, being the only thing she could sense.

At the risk of being punched in the head by her daughter again, she reached up and pulled off the hood. She immediately noticed the massive light show overhead and Asano's aura, even more pervasive now that the hood was gone. All attention was elsewhere and Melody took a gamble attempting to slink away. There were only a couple of the shadow familiars left and even Sophie was too distracted by the giant eye washing the platform in blue and orange light. With the aura washing out any other magical sense, no one noticed as Melody slipped through the doorway and went looking for a way out.

Melody's speed was limited by the shackles on her wrists and ankles but she adapted fairly well, managing a surprisingly swift shuffle. She made her way down the stairs quickly ducking through an open doorway as she heard three people come rushing up the stairs. Pressed against the wall, she heard them go right past her on the other side. Fortunately, there was no risk of them sensing her aura with Asano's continuing to ramp up.

While she was certainly curious as to what was going on she wouldn't give up a precious chance of freedom over it. Fortunately, the aura was not hostile, feeling more like a benevolent, yet utterly unyielding dictator.

Melody made her way down the stairs, spotting a large open archway that led outside, but something rose from the floor, not through it but being made from the cloud-stuff the floor was comprised of. It was made of the same dark cloud-stuff as the floor from which it emerged, but then the cloud stuff became more substantive. It took the form of a person who was not tall in the first place and made all the shorter by the absence of a head. The cloud material became solid, blank and featureless; a black, headless mannequin.

A nebulous blue and orange eye blinked into existence large enough to occupy the space where the mannequin's head should have been. Then red robes, the colour of dried blood were conjured over it, as was a hooded cloak, void-black and dotted with stars.

It looked like Asano if one of his eyes had grown to replace his entire head, the eye watching from the hood like an alien face. Melody stood still as she and the strange entity

watched one another. She took a cautious step forward, then another as the entity didn't react. Then she tried dashing past and it blurred into motion. Its cloak floated around it, obscuring it just as Asano's had when she fought him. Its movements, or what she could see of them, seemed identical to Asano's.

It intercepted her as it conjured a black and red dagger into its hand. She tried to dodge but the dagger went beyond normal reach using an arm made of shadows and slashed her arm. She was better than Asano and this strange replica of him, but not while she was shackled and collared. Her movement was impeded and her powers suppressed, while the simulacrum could use at least some of Asano's abilities.

The entity smoothly flowed into her path, blocking her escape. It swung the dagger again and she fell back. The entity didn't follow, remaining between her and the archway leading out.

Melody looked at the cut on her arm and saw immediate evidence of brutal afflictions, feeling them in her body at the same time. The flesh around the wound was already darkening and veins were becoming visible as they turned black under her skin.

Blood was a part of every essence user's body, regardless of rank, not disappearing with rank the way the heart, lungs and even the brain did. The blood flow of a silver-ranker was not like that of a normal person, however. Their circulatory systems were closer to what Jason would recognise as a chart of meridians and acupoints. Even the blood itself was not the same, being a channel for mana rather than oxygen and the other elements critical to a human body.

Melody felt the taint coursing through her blood, left behind by the entity's conjured dagger. It was unpleasant, but not anything she couldn't deal with if she just got away. She hadn't been subjected to the dangerous spell Asano used to endlessly escalate his afflictions.

"Your fate is to suffer."

The entity didn't sound like a living thing, its voice tombstone cold. Melody knew Asano's powers and she knew that incantation, having been given thorough information on Asano and his insidious abilities. She wasn't sure how he was replicating himself while dying upstairs, but now she had to get away and find a way to cleanse herself before the afflictions now growing inside her became too advanced to deal with.

She knew she wouldn't be able to get past the entity while she was manacled, but it only seemed to be blocking her way out. She went back up the stairs in search of another egress but found a second, identical entity rising from the floor. She looked back, confirming there were two of them.

The new one raised an arm, pointing not the way she had come but through a door. Outnumbered, collared and chained, Melody played along. Now that the afflictions eating into her flesh were escalating, she needed someone to remove them and fast. It was now clear that she would only find that as a prisoner. The entity led her into a room; an empty black cube, devoid of any features other than the doorway she had walked through.

“If you don’t find someone to get these afflictions off of me,” she said, turning to face the entity, “you might as well kill me and save the suffering.”

The entity raised a hand and melody’s eyes went wide, wondering if it was going to take her up on killing her.

“Feed us your sins.”

Having her life force radiate out from her body was a surprisingly warm and pleasant sensation, surrounding her with a red glow. She both saw and felt the taint in her life force, and also how it was drained away, vanishing into the entity’s hand. Her life force receded into her body but the entity didn’t lower its hand. Leeches shot out of it, spattering across her body. She moved to start swatting them away but then paused, looking back to the entity that was now lowering its hand.

The leeches did not appear to be replicas created from cloud stuff but the genuine article; Asano’s actual familiar. Despite their tiny rings of savage lamprey teeth, the leeches were not drinking her blood. She realised they were a warning not to go wandering again.

The doorway behind the entity closed. There was no light in the room, only the blue-orange glow of the nebula eye, inside the hood. Everything went black as the eye blinked out of existence.

In the dark, Melody was not afraid but contemplative. The information she had was that Asano’s cleansing power was more deadly to enemies than the afflictions it removed, yet she felt nothing but refreshed. While the wound on her arm remained, the afflictions delivered through it did not, and nothing had been left in their place. The fact that her peak-silver recovery attribute was healing the wound fast enough that she could feel it was evidence enough.

Carlos looked at the giant image of daylight inside a cloak, inside a dark field that towered over the island below it. Taller than any building he had ever seen, they had spotted it well before the island came into view.

“That’s him, alright,” Carlos said.

In Greenstone, several years ago, Carlos had once tested Jason, projecting his aura with a ritual to check that there was not a star seed of the Builder hidden in his soul. Underestimating the power Jason's soul could output, relative to his lowly iron rank, Carlos had made the ritual too powerful. The result was a similar, but much smaller image being projected over the city of Greenstone, along with Jason's aura.

In the hours following the appearance of the massive projection, the aura it extended slowly diminished. Night came and the daylight portion of the projection lit up the sky of Arnote until the projection itself finally started growing smaller as the dawn approached. As for the woman named Dawn, she did not approach, watching, unnoticed, from high in the air. Her vessel, a cottage inside a translucent bubble, was invisible to the eyes and magical senses of all but the local diamond-rankers.

She stood in the cottage garden, right where it met the globe, looking below. After having used her single intervention to eliminate one of the Builder's cities, she had to be careful about anything that could be seen as her intervening again. She could not afford to be further restricted before the next time she needed to act, which was still years away.

If she'd been forced to step in to keep Jason alive, it would have been a significant problem. The Builder could have leveraged the infraction and it would have made things much more difficult later. The World-Phoenix's interest in Jason ended once the integrity of the two worlds was assured, which meant that forces currently held at bay by that attention would no longer hold back from acting. The next time Dawn could step in to help Jason, it would be wholly of her own volition, without the World-Phoenix's support. If she had already been punished for overstepping, that would be more difficult, if even possible at all.

Dawn's senses were not blocked even by the monumental aura spilling out of the cloud temple like some spiritual cataclysm. She kept careful watch over Jason's condition and felt relief wash through her as she felt him pass out of danger. He was hideously damaged, both physically and spiritually, and would take a long time to recover, but he would survive. And inside the cloud construct, he was about as safe as he could be short of Dawn hiding him herself.

With the commotion kicked up by the display coming from Jason's cloud temple, The Adventure Society and Magic Society were forced to step in, along with the civic authorities. While not being harmful to anyone, the aura coming from the temple caused panic across the island, especially in conjunction with the humungous physical projection

that went with it. Coming not so long after the Builder city attack on Rimaros, many thought another such attack was in progress.

While the authorities were moving to handle the chaos, various others had more specific goals. Carlos, Arabelle, Farrah and Rufus arrived and immediately entered the temple, none of them being rejected. Greetings were brief, the team knowing Carlos from the months he spent helping Jason years before.

The platform at the top of the cloud temple was large, which was useful with the increasing number of people present. Along with the unconscious Jason was his team, Rufus and his team, Taika, Travis, Arabelle and Carlos. Shade's presence was a pair of bodies, glowing blue-white with overcharged mana. He was not the only familiar, with Stash having, at some point, shifted from Belinda's form to Jason's as he fretted. The copy Jason looked down at the real one, identical aside from looking much healthier and having a bushy moustache.

Under the domineering sky projection, Carlos confirmed that Jason would survive, although he warned the others that the recovery time would be extensive. He would likely not even wake up for days, possibly weeks. On hearing that, Humphrey looked up at the projection, then at the team.

"You know what Jason would have us doing in this situation," he said.

"Making sandwiches," Neil said. After working with Clive and Shade to keep Jason alive, all three were looking worse for wear. Neil looked exhausted, Clive was pale and his dark brown hair had turned such a glossy black it looked almost like it had a blue sheen. Shade was even more off-colour than Clive's hair, his usual black mostly silver-blue.

"No," Humphrey said. "He would not... okay, he probably *would* want us making sandwiches, but more importantly, he isn't the only member of the team in danger. Before things went so wrong we had a plan, and that plan is still in motion. Belinda is going to reveal the location of the enemy stronghold and we have to be ready to move when she does."

"We're in too," Rufus said, Gary and Farrah nodding their agreement.

Humphrey looked at Carlos and Arabelle, talking quietly where they were crouched over Jason.

"We need to leave him to the experts," he said. "Princess Liara was assembling the strike team for the stronghold, so we need to go find her and join it."

"I am afraid that I will be of limited assistance," Shade said. "The two bodies I have here are infused with overcharged mana. They will break down in a relatively short time and are of little use unless you need something to explode."

“Oh, I imagine we can find a use for that,” Farrah said.

“My four remaining intact bodies are with Belinda, Princess Liara, Korinne Pescos in the mining facility, and the Adventure Society official currently managing the mining facility evacuation,” Shade said. “The princess is already on her way back to Livaros with her husband. I will inform her of your intentions and your imminent arrival, if that is satisfactory.”

“It is,” Humphrey said. “Clive, we’re going to need a ride.”

Magic seeped through the front of Clive’s clothes, coalescing into the form of his rune tortoise familiar, Onslow. Onslow floated in the air and started growing, the shell opening into top and bottom halves. Inside was a little humanoid tortoise, looking out curiously with big eyes.

“Wait, where’s the zealot?” Sophie asked, remembering Melody.

“The cloud house has detained her,” Shade said. “Colin is currently guarding her.”

“What do you mean, the cloud house detained her?” Clive asked.

“I am not entirely clear on that,” Shade said. “I suspect answers will wait on the awakening of Mr Asano.”

“But he probably got some absurd new ability from all this, didn't he?” Neil asked.

“It would appear so,” Shade said.

“See?” Gary asked Taika. “What did I say?”

Chapter 569

We're Adventurers

"Clear," Shade signalled Belinda. She was wary of using her aura senses to check for order members as it wasn't in character, so Shade was serving as lookout. The tunnels of the stronghold were dug right out of the mountain and carved smooth. Wall sconces provided light from glow stones but they were dimmed down to a deep gloom. The sconces regulated light in the complex, mimicking the daylight patterns outside. It was an approach common to underground spaces designed for long-term habitation, including the mining complex where Belinda had split from her team. The idea was to prevent those living underground for extended periods from losing their sense of time.

Belinda stepped around the corner and up to a doorway set with brickwork around it, rather than the stone from which most of the walls had been carved. She had a handful of chalk sticks in very similar shades of grey, all quite close to the colour of the bricks. She held them up to a light sconce affixed beside the doorway, using the light to compare the chalk to the brickwork for the closest match.

After picking one, she started drawing sigils in the bricks. The chalk was a close enough match that she couldn't even make out what she was drawing on them, especially in the dim light.

"It is fortunate that you had an appropriate shade of chalk," Shade noted.

"Lucky my pert-yet-supple flanks. You have no idea how many colours I have in storage. I think I have more magic supplies than Clive, although mine are a bit different."

"I stand corrected."

"I didn't think you stood at all," Belinda said as she crouched down to scrawl on a low brick. "I thought you just floated there, pretending to stand."

"Miss Belinda, I understand that you were raised among the underclass, but I would think you have been an adventurer long enough to understand that it is impolite to point out the shortcomings of others."

Belinda chuckled as she continued drawing sigils.

"If I might ask, Miss Belinda, how can you tell what is behind each of these secure doors?"

"Magical infrastructure on a large scale falls within only a handful of different patterns for each type of installation. There's not a lot of point reinventing what's been iterated on many times and works reliably. It makes it easier to find replacements for damaged elements and people with experience doing the work. My guess is that whatever poor

pricks dug this place out were disposed of after. It'd take a good lot of them, even using magic, and the villains couldn't leave them to talk. It kind of shows in the workmanship that whoever did this place up didn't put their heart into it. Good for us, because it leaves plenty to exploit."

"This allowed you to map out the place from known patterns?"

"Only to a degree. There's a reason we went wandering about the place, watching people go in and out. Add that to some confident assumptions and a bit of extrapolation and I have a decent idea of what we're looking at. It's also how I came up with the specifics of our plan here. The important bit was figuring out where the prisoner was."

Belinda was crouched down to finish the last brick, then stood up, slapping her hands casually to knock off chalk dust.

"How long until these lights come on?" she asked.

Shade pulled a watch from his storage space.

"Six hours and nine minutes. But there will be people moving around before the lights come back on."

"That's why I have you looking out for me. Once the lights come back up, the chalk will still be hard to notice, but silver rank eyes are sharp. The sigils might get spotted, especially if someone has some obscure perception ability."

Belinda stood up, stowing the chalk in her own storage space as Shade did the same with the watch.

"You share that storage with all the other Shade bodies, right?"

"Strictly speaking, each body has its own storage space and can tap into the storage space of any other body. A body that gets destroyed autonomically pushes the contents of its storage to other bodies, if available. If cut off, such as by astral spaces that block communication or emplaced defences, like this facility, we cannot access other storage."

"So, no getting around being cut off by passing notes?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Best get moving, then, if we're going to get this done by morning. See if we can't crack open this egg."

"Alacrity would be best," Shade agreed. "I do not know the circumstances, but I believe that most of my other bodies have been destroyed."

No shortage of people had been drawn to Arnote by the aura that crashed out like a spiritual tsunami. Even as far away as Livaros, the diamond-rankers, all but the most oblivious golds and even some sensitive silver-rankers picked up on the commotion,

despite the enormous distance. That alone was terrifying, prompting various interests to send people to investigate.

As more people gathered around in the previously sleepy beach town, it was not hard for Soramir to blend in with his aura masterfully restrained. Few people could recognise him on sight, although more than before following his participation in the battle against the Builder city. As adventurers were prone to favouring large hoods to seem mysterious, however, slipping one on made for a highly effective disguise.

The crowd growing in the town was made up primarily of bronze-rankers, shoved onto any available transport and sent to investigate like canaries into a coal mine. The established forces were already organising things, with the Magic Society, Adventure Society and local authorities doing their best to keep some kind of order as essence users crowded the little town.

While the people around him could not see through Soramir's aura disguise, they were an open book to his diamond-rank senses. He blended into the crowd, easily picking out those who, like him, were hiding their true strength. He had also noticed Dawn up in the sky, but did not so much as glance in that direction.

He recognised a man by his aura who was similarly disguised and approached, activating a privacy screen around them. It was an unremarkable move as every little cluster of people was using a similar shield. Soramir's was of the finest quality; an expensive combination of very powerful and very subtle.

"Archbishop," he said in greeting to the man wearing a hood much like his own.

"Ancestral Majesty," the archbishop said, sounding unsurprised.

"Your lord told you it was me, didn't he?" Soramir asked, wry amusement in his voice. "This is why I dislike working with clergy."

The archbishop glanced up in the direction of Dawn's flying vessel, invisible to the naked eye and all but the most powerful of magical senses.

"You've been dealing with those more powerful than you more than usual of late," the Archbishop noted. "But also those far less. Perhaps returning to this world has broadened your horizons in both directions."

"I don't strictly hold that gods are more powerful than me," Soramir clarified. "They simply operate on a different paradigm."

Soramir sensed the amusement in the priest.

"Of course, Ancestral Majesty."

"What is it that prompted you to come in person, Archbishop?"

"I imagine the same thing that brought you, Ancestral Majesty."

“He truly is favoured by your god, then? I suspected as much the first time I got a look at his aura.”

“He caught our god’s eye much earlier than you did, if you’ll forgive the comparison, Ancestral Majesty. You were more conservative than Mr Asano in your youth.”

“I’ve never heard my early years described like that before,” Soramir said. “Just the opposite, in fact. Although, I certainly didn’t cause this kind of commotion at silver-rank. Even when he’s not directly involved, Asano always seems at least tangentially connected to every absurd event this monster surge throws at us.”

“To be fair, Ancestral Majesty, he was the one who set it off in the first place.”

“Are you or your god going to intervene in events here?”

“No. You know that those with my god’s favour are expected to forge their own path. In any case, my god cannot see inside the building, let alone meddle. Even the platform open to the sky is hidden from the gods, while you and I could see should we simply fly into the air.”

“It really is a temple, then?”

“Not as the gods would sanctify, from what I understand, but something that uses the same methods. A mortal needs different things from a temple than a god, or so I would assume.”

“And something went wrong with Asano’s temple?”

“As my god explained it, Asano seems to have attempted to found another temple on the land around his existing one.”

“A temple to what?”

“Himself.”

“That may be the single most arrogant thing I have ever heard. And I’ve met people who rule planets.”

“The attempt was never intended to succeed, Ancestral Majesty. Asano seems to have injected himself with power beyond his ability to endure, then attempted a task beyond his ability to accomplish, burning that power off in the failed attempt.”

“But how was he even able to make that attempt? Isn’t the founding of temples the domain of gods?”

“Yes,” the Archbishop said. “Yes, it is.”

“I can see why Dominion is so interested in him.”

Liara was back at her post in one of the Adventure Society admin buildings, using the Shade body with her and the one still in the mining facility to communicate with the adventurers there. Baseph was in the next room, reuniting with their son.

Humphrey, Sophie, Neil and Clive were shown in by reluctant Adventure Society functionaries. Both Humphrey and Sophie's shadows were tinted blue and radiated volatile magic. Liara had needed to personally intervene to allow them into the building.

"What are you doing here?" Liara asked. "Did something happen to Asano?"

"Jason is out of danger," Humphrey told her. "The same is not true for every member of our team."

"You want a place on the response team waiting to hit the Purity stronghold," Liara deduced.

"You said this was an option if we were out of the mining facility in time," Humphrey said.

"Things have escalated a little since then," Liara said. "And unless Asano is joining you, you don't have the option of him using Shade to get in and open a portal."

"Jason won't be joining us," Humphrey said. "Even so, we would like to be part of the response group."

"I've talked to Baseph about what happened. He said you brought a prisoner with you out of the mining complex."

She turned her gaze on Sophie but didn't elaborate.

"No idea what you're talking about," Sophie said.

"I need that prisoner."

"No, you *want* that prisoner," Neil said.

"Hypothetical prisoner," Clive clarified. "If she did exist, you have to realise she would be more likely to at least have hostile exchanges with us. To you, she's just another Purity worshipper you can't get to talk."

"I've also been speaking with Callum Morse."

"Are you saying you won't give us a place in the group unless we hand over this alleged prisoner?" Humphrey asked.

"Yes."

Humphrey turned without another word, the others moving to follow.

"Wait," Liara said. The team half-turned to look back at her.

"You aren't going to threaten to take Shade away if I don't help you?" she asked.

"Without Shade, helping the people still in that mining facility is harder," Neil said.

"We're adventurers," Clive added. "We'd never do that."

“Just to be clear,” Sophie chimed in, “I definitely would do that and said that we should.”

Humphrey frowned at her.

“I was out-voted,” Sophie added, refusing to meet his eyes in the manner of a guilty child. Humphrey gave his head an exasperated shake and looked back at Liara.

“Jason wouldn’t do it either,” he said. “So Shade wouldn’t stop helping you, whatever we said.”

“Alright, I’ll give you a slot in the group,” Liara conceded. “But we aren’t done talking about that prisoner.”

In the Order of redeeming Light’s hollowed-out mountain stronghold, the light sconces slowly started to grow brighter as the morning approached outside. Some of the Order members were already up and about, being early risers by nature, but were somewhat at a loss as to what to do with themselves. Deprived of Melody’s leadership and with the two remaining cell leaders circling one another like hyenas around a carcass, they were uncharacteristically directionless.

The first stage of Belinda’s plan had been to move through the stronghold during the night, writing sigils on many of the magically secured doors. The transition point of the plan came as the order members were just starting to rouse and was less subtle.

The section of the facility dividing the general areas from the leader-restricted areas was an open archway with no more magical protection than signal magic should someone without permission or any dangerous substance pass through. As it sailed through the archway, Belinda’s magical bomb detected as dangerous.

Chapter 570

The Person in My Care

There was no one in the small lounge area when the bomb went off and it did nothing more than smash up and knock around some furniture. The goal was neither harm nor damage but to trigger the alarm and sow some chaos. People were quick to scramble but they were running everywhere, knowing they should be reacting but uncertain as to how or what was even happening. This allowed Belinda to move without being remarked upon while she waited for the two leaders to do her work for her. It wasn't long before they did exactly that, triggering the facility lockdown.

The stronghold's most secure rooms would have taken time and resources for Belinda to crack open just one, let alone the several she would doubtless need to find the right rooms to perform her sabotage. What she had noticed in her initial scouting, however, was that the reinforced doors could be further secured by having more magic funnelled into them.

This was a setup quite common to places that people like Belinda were hired to remove things from, despite the owners not wanting them to. It was also a setup Belinda looked down on, being something an infrastructure specialist would devise, rather than a security specialist. It was neat, clean and efficient, making it ripe for dirtying up.

The purpose of the sigils Belinda had drawn onto the doors was to apply a crude but effective modification to enchantments built into the doorway. It didn't do anything in normal operation, but that would change should a lockdown be triggered. That would cause the facility infrastructure to feed additional magic through the brickwork doorframe and into the door, reinforcing both the door itself and the locking mechanism.

The mistake an infrastructure specialist made, that a security specialist would not, was keeping the setup overly simple. This made it less prone to failure during normal operation, but more prone to tampering. Belinda targeted a simple aspect of the system that shut off the extra magic once the door's extra security was fully charged. Her modification stopped the magic spigot from closing once it was opening, continually feeding magic into the door.

Unknowingly, Belinda had done a very similar thing to the doors to what Shade had done to his own bodies, dangerously overcharging them through excessive magic drain. The end result was also similar, making the doors extremely volatile. The bomb had done its job and prompted the cell leaders currently running the facility to order a lockdown.

Belinda knew that she had some time while the doors built-up charge before things got exciting.

In the time it took the doors to accumulate enough power to explode, Belinda made good time moving through the facility towards her objectives. The ordinary doors at the end of each tunnel and the entrance to each room had been automatically closed and sealed by the lockdown, but that barely slowed her down. Unlike the secure doors she'd taken the time to modify, ordinary magic locks gave way to Belinda's specialty tools in moments. This gave her more mobility through complex than anyone but the leaders, whom the locks did not bar.

As Belinda moved around, she repeatedly paused to drop a quick spell.

"Emplace the mark of power."

It was a spell she shared with Clive, albeit through different essences. The Rune Trap spell created a glowing sigil on the floor, which she placed in front of the locking mechanisms the leaders would need to release to move around freely. The designated spot displayed a glowing rune for a few moments – the critical weakness of the Rune Trap – before turning invisible. Someone sufficiently perceptive might pick up on the rune's presence, but even if they did, their purpose was to slow down the order members.

How they were slowed down made little practical difference to Belinda, although her preference was by blowing people up. One power wasn't enough to kill a silver-ranker, but the trap was enough to ring their bell very, very hard. If she was lucky, the blasts would damage some of the locking mechanisms, meaning the doors would stay shut until smashed down or the mechanism was repaired.

Failing brutal explosions, other methods to deal with the traps would slow them down enough. Taking the time to locate, identify and negate the traps would slow them down considerably, assuming they even had people with the right abilities. She guessed that the Purity worshippers had no shortage of dispelling abilities, though. The fastest approach would probably be to walk the purified converted into the traps and set them off, at which point damage to the locks would be her best hope.

Belinda had wasted no time after infiltrating the stronghold, identifying her key targets in the hours before most of the order went to sleep for the night. She was guesstimating which of the secure rooms held facility infrastructure and which held the defences she was here to disable, but her guesses were pretty good in facilities like this. She had rigged enough of the secure doors around the facility both to obfuscate her targets and give her access to enough rooms that she'd find the right ones to sabotage the place, even with a false start or two. Even then, she could probably have some fun along the way.

Belinda's main concern was not successfully sabotaging the place. Anything as comprehensive as shielding the interior of an entire mountain would have no shortage of potential failure points. Her worry was getting caught in the period between sabotaging the defences and reinforcements arriving.

"I'm not sure I want to go in there," Belinda said.

She had found where the Order of Redeeming Light's prisoner, Gibson Amouz, was being held. The floor, ceiling and three of the walls were the usual flat stone, with incredibly intricate ritual diagrams carved into each. The last wall was made of glass, through which Belinda was observing the room from the outside. The glass was also etched with an intricate ritual diagram that, like all the others, was glowing with silver light.

In the centre of the room, Gibson Amouz was looking the worse for wear, strung up in a cage too narrow for him to do anything but stand. Surrounding the cage was a ring of silver flames.

"Actually," Belinda added, "I'm not certain I *can* go in there."

The feature conspicuously absent from the room was a door. Belinda looked around, seeing a few subtle signs that the glass could be made to flow like a liquid to create an opening, but she was certain that doing so in the middle of the ritual going on would be very bad for the person inside. She had a feeling he was being subjected to whatever the order did to 'purify' their prospective members.

"I don't think I can rescue this guy," she said. "I won't be able to extract him from whatever's happening in there without doing more harm than good."

"You can't decipher how to safely interrupt the ritual?" Shade asked.

"No," she said. "Well, probably, but not anywhere near fast enough. I'm a practical magic specialist; this kind of high-end, magic-for-magic's-sake stuff is Clive's area. Also, I'm pretty sure there's divine magic involved in this ritual. That's doesn't mean it can't be handled, but it's also something I haven't dealt with a lot."

"You didn't rob a lot of temples?" Shade asked.

"Absolutely not," Belinda said, plainly affronted. "I would never. Well, not *never* – desperate times, you know. But definitely not a lot. I mean, 'a lot,' is a very vague term. Different people might define—"

"More than five."

"Oh, who seriously thinks five is a lot? You can count that on one hand."

The two cell leaders, Elise and Marika, stormed angrily through the mountain stronghold, collecting scattered order members as they came across them. They burned with identical, furious frustration as things spiralled further and further out of control. Not least of their frustrations was being forced to work with each other, but larger problems dominated their factional rivalry.

Things had been going wrong since the mining facility, when the Adventure Society responded to the order's incursion with impossible speed. At first, it had seemed like the perfect opportunity for the pair. After everything going her way for so long, Melody had finally made a critical mistake as the operation quickly collapsed.

While not ideal for the order, both Elise and Marika saw the chance to seize control and lead the order in a better direction. Escaping Melody's disaster was a triumph, with the only problem for each being that the other escaped as well. They were both grateful that none of the other cell leaders had made it out, however, leaving only one obstacle to dominance.

For the moment, however, they were forced to work together. Melody's plan was only the first disaster, and the disarray left in its wake was only made the chaos they now faced worse. Explosions were happening everywhere and the lockdown was doing more harm than good. The order's members were scattered and Elise's core team, the ones loyal not just to Purity but to her personally, were coming together in dribs and drabs.

Trying to release the lockdown after struggling through one trapped room after another had outright failed, either through damage or sabotage to the stronghold's magical infrastructure. The only benefit to any of it was that the rune traps at least served as a breadcrumb trail that would sooner or later, lead to the perpetrator.

As for who was behind it, their best guess was the adventuring team that had helped them escape the mining facility. At first, their assignment guarding the dock there had seemed serendipitous, but now they suspected design, their Adventure Society infiltrators having been turned against them.

Moving through one locked room after another was troublesome even when the majority of the rooms weren't trapped. Someone was messing with the utility infrastructure, causing the ubiquitous light sconces to act up. At one moment they would shut off to plunge a room into darkness, only to then flare into a blinding candescence. Other times they rapidly flickered between the two in a disorienting staccato strobe.

"Someone must have meddled with the utility rooms," Marika said.

"Oh, you think?" Elise asked. "No getting past you, is there? You'd make a terrific leader."

It was when her senses expanded that they truly started to panic. After becoming accustomed to having their magical senses boxed-in by the stronghold perception shields, being able to sense beyond the wall was odd, then dread-inducing as they realised the ramifications. If their senses now extended past the exterior of the mountain, anyone outside could now sense the interior. When they felt the artificial aura of a beacon device light up somewhere inside the mountain, they knew they were doomed.

"We're compromised," Marika said.

"Another stellar insight," Elise snarled, already moving in the direction of the submersible docks. Marika followed, but when they arrived, their dismay only grew. There should have been six of the submersible vehicles; five of the type the order used and one stolen materials hauler.

The hauler was just gone. One of the submersibles was starting to sink, another was already dipping below the water and the rest, from what Elise could see of the depths, had already sunk. Then Marika, who was better at seeing through water, finally pointed out something that Elise had not already noticed.

"There are two sunken submersibles and the two still sinking. The hauler has been turned sideways underwater and scuttled in the submerged tunnel, from what I can see, blocking off the underwater exit."

"That leaves one submersible unaccounted for," Elise said. "It looks like our turncoats have already fled."

"But how do we get out, now?" Marika asked. "Did Melody have a secret alternate exit?"

"You think she'd tell me and not you?"

"Then what? Do we swim for it? How much time do we—"

They both looked up as something shook the mountain.

"I guess that's why they call him the siege sword," Neil observed as they watched from an airship as the dust cloud bloomed off the mountain. "It feels like he'd do better with a hammer essence or something."

The response team had already been on a pair of airships and in the air, waiting for the beacon signal when it came. The Shade with Belinda had immediately shared its memories with the other bodies once the stronghold defences dropped, so Liara at the Adventure Society was immediately briefed. One each of the blue Shade bodies charged with volatile mana were on the two airships, briefing the expedition leaders there.

The airships were not trade vessels but rapid-deployment troop transports; small, fast and filled to the gills with adventurers. They had moved swiftly, not even gold-rank monsters fool enough to mess with the cluster of auras rocketing through the air. Arriving at the mountain, they had a good idea from Shade what was inside and didn't waste time. Gold rankers immediately started to break right in through the side, none more effectively than Trenchant Moore, the siege sword.

While the other gold-rankers went right over the side of the airship, Trenchant had paused for a moment to gather energy. To the surprise of onlookers, he even drained the excess energy from Shade's body, returning it to its customary black.

"Ooh, that's a bit much," Trenchant said, eyes wide, then he too vaulted over the side of the skyship. Shortly thereafter, the side of the mountain exploded.

Callum Morse approached the ominous black cloud temple, pausing for a moment before stepping through the open archway with stairs leading up and in. He paid close attention to his condition, but it seemed the aura, while disconcerting, did not see him as hostile in the way he had heard about it treating others. He started making his way up the steps, attempting to push his senses through the walls but getting nowhere. Halfway up the stairs, he found someone standing in his way.

"Hello, Belle."

"Hello Cal," Arabelle said. "You're making a mistake right now. I thought we talked about this."

"There's an opportunity for me here."

She shook her head, looking at him like a puppy resistant to toilet training.

"You're a good hunter, Cal. You always have been. But you're terrible with people. You always let me help you with that, but it seems that you've forgotten, in the years since we were a team. Let me help you again, Cal."

"Are you saying you'll stand against me?"

"I'm saying that you're only hurting your cause."

"Not if I get what I came for."

She shook her head, looking down with a grumbling moan.

"And Jason thinks *he's* oblivious to consequences," she muttered, then turned her gaze back up at her former teammate.

"You're bringing trouble to the person in my care, Callum."

Her voice was gentle but his face paled. He turned around went back down the stairs.