

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.