

## 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.