

## 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."

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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.”

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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.”

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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.