

Chapter 571

I Love a Hypocrite

Belinda's escape from the Order of the Redeeming Light's stronghold, leaving a dock full of ruined submarines in her wake, was not made alone. Her companion was neither the one she hoped for nor intended, but she knew full well that no plan went perfectly.

The need for improvisation had started back when she found Gibson Amouz. Ideally, she would have extricated him to avoid his becoming collateral damage or a hostage when the Adventure Society breached the stronghold. After finding him caught up in a complicated ritual she would not risk interrupting, she was forced to leave him for the Adventure Society forces to rescue.

She had been midway through sabotaging the stronghold defence infrastructure when she had encountered the imprisoned Amouz. After she left him, she had to visit several more of the formerly secure rooms, their security doors now blasted off, before the protections dropped. Whatever infrastructure specialist had designed the place might have been poor on anti-tampering, but they were big on redundancy.

After completing the final sabotage sequence, the defences started to wind down as the magic fuelling them was interrupted. Belinda set up the aura beacon on a delay, which she hoped would draw the order members to it while she made good her escape. If she got too caught up avoiding the order, she would have to find a hiding spot and wait for the Adventure Society to arrive. If that happened, they would be taking a dim view of her stealing things, which wouldn't impact what she'd already picked up wandering around. Unfortunately, a submersible wouldn't fit in her dimensional storage space.

By the time Belinda was making her way to the dock, the order had become active throughout the complex. They had dealt with many of the locked doors and traps she had left behind and were becoming harder to dodge. More and more she was slowing down to duck into rooms or storage spaces as enemies passed her by. She was still disguised as one of them, but the woman she was disguised as was a known follower. It wouldn't help Belinda's escape if she was recruited into the search for herself. On the upside, she came across more than a few things worth slipping into her storage space.

In the course of her escape, Belinda realised that the order had jumped to conclusions about the cause of their current troubles. The turncoat adventurers that had been secretly working for the order had helped them escape the mining facility and, having revealed themselves, joined the order in their stronghold. It was an understandable but

incorrect assumption that they were the ones responsible for the sabotage that took place shortly after their arrival.

Belinda realised this was happening when she found a group of order members attacking the now-former adventurers. The silver-rank combat was typically destructive and she needed to find a way past the rolling battle. With a good number of doors still locked down, she picked one and cracked it open with her intrusion tools, locking it again behind her. Inside was a short tunnel, leading to a trap door that was also locked.

“Potentially promising.”

It took only moments to crack the lock on the hatch, revealing a spiral staircase leading down. At the bottom was yet another locked door, to another short tunnel and yet another locked door.

“I think I’m going to find something special in here.”

In the process of going through each lock, she realised that they weren’t integrated into the wider infrastructure of the facility. The doors weren’t as secure as the ones Belinda had needed to blow up but they were designed to remain permanently secured, and not just sealed during a lockdown.

With each lock that capitulated to the ministrations of her intrusion tools, Belinda’s anticipation for whatever was waiting at the end grew. When she opened the final door, what she found inside was startling.

“What in the sweet gods is happening here?”

At first glance, she thought she had found another prisoner, in a torture chamber. It only took a moment to realise something entirely different was going on.

She moved close to the man chained upright in a freestanding metal rack. He looked at her with wild eyes, unable to speak through the gag strapped over his mouth. Like the chains suspending him in a spreadeagle vertical position, the metal ball the gag used to fill his mouth was made of hardened and enchanted materials that even a silver-ranker apparently couldn’t break through, although his rank was an assumption. She couldn’t sense his aura with the suppression collar around his neck.

Belinda looked around the room, finding it was a very strange fit for the complex around it. Instead of the clean, minimalist stone, typical for the Church of Purity, this was opulent and luxurious, with rich wall treatments, thick carpeting and indulgent layers of pillows and soft blankets in lieu of furniture.

Belinda turned her attention back to the man standing in the vertical prison rack. Looking closer, the wrist and ankle shackles were cushioned, with padding, as was the suppression collar.

"I've built some setups like this myself," she told the man. "Lucrative stuff. They have this place back in my hometown they call The Fortress. Did Jason ever take you, Shade?"

"No," Shade's voice came from Belinda's shadow. "While Mr Asano's proclivities are certainly unconventional, they are less... spanking-related."

"Yeah, it doesn't seem like his flavour of strange," she agreed, turning back the trapped man.

"It's something of a playground for the rich and powerful," she explained to him as she continued to look around the room. "People with the kind of appetites that are best kept discreet in proper society. I was surprised by how common it was for those with what was effectively absolute power to fantasise about being powerless. Never truly powerless, though; they always leave themselves an out. A method of control. Which makes me wonder how you ended up in here, strung up naked and all alone."

She looked around again, taking particular notice of the thick carpeting.

"It looks like someone shuffled out of here quickly," she mused, then looked up at the chained man with a grin.

"Oh dear," she said. "You've been playing games with those people you converted, haven't you? Their independent thinking stripped away and replaced with obedience. You probably gave them instructions on how you like your jollies with you and when to let you out after. You'd have had some kind of signal to make them release you, too, but something went wrong, didn't it?"

She laughed as realisation struck.

"The lockdown," she said. "Your mindless victims are under standing orders to mobilise if a lockdown happens, aren't they? They must have shuffled off immediately and not seen whatever gesture you use to make them let you out."

She looked at the man's face as he stared daggers at her and she laughed again.

"Oh, I'm exactly right."

She took another glance around the room as she took a bottle of soporific poison from her storage space.

"Are you sure you're a Church of Purity guy? I love a hypocrite as much as the next girl with a history of blackmail, but this is a lot."

The dock had been in chaos, which was useful to Belinda. Her original plan had been to purloin one of the submersibles, but with the order members leaderless and in chaos, she revised her ambitions. The order members on the dock had split into two factions, arguing over taking the submersibles and evacuating immediately. The members whose

cell leaders never came back from the mining complex wanted to leave, while Marika and Elise' people did not.

As a compromise, they had the neutral and obedient pure converted prepping the vessels for departure, loading in supplies and the most valuable resources quickly available from the dock area. This gave Belinda a chance to shapeshift into a pure converted, mimicking their blank auras as she slipped into each of the vessels, pretending to load goods while really performing sabotage. The hauler submersible, loaded with materials from the mining complex, was a pleasant surprise. Designed to be largely self-operating, she figured out how to delay-trigger it to block off the underwater passage and cover her escape.

Only the submarine she intended to steal went unsabotaged, and she did load something onto it. It was an unconscious man, wrapped up in a very nice blanket and stowed in a crate.

Belinda's greatest stroke of luck came when she finally took off in one of the submersibles. Rather than quickly react to her, the two sides started blaming each other, buying her valuable time to get away.

Belinda had never driven a submersible before, but that proved not to be a problem. She possessed various abilities that allowed her to gain expertise akin to that of a skill book, only temporarily, in various fields. Her Instant Adept ability offered some ranged and agility-based attack options but was the least combat-oriented of that power subset. Its true worth was utility, allowing her to pilot the vessel to an adequate degree and escape from the facility.

"...and that, Clive, is how I got you one of their submersibles," Belinda finished.

Clive looked out from one of the balconies of the looming temple to look over the lagoon.

"Where is it, then?" he asked.

"I stashed it, obviously. I don't want the Adventure Society saying it's theirs, just because I was on a contract. I stole it fair and square."

Humphrey gave her a disapproving look. Jason's team, minus the still-comatose Jason himself, were gathered on a large terrace balcony of Jason's cloud temple. With them were Rufus and his team, plus Taika and Travis. With everything that had gone on, they were all looking to hunker down, at least until Jason woke up.

“I’m kidding, obviously,” Belinda assured Humphrey. “The submersible sank. I forget where, so there’s no point bothering to look for it and I’m definitely not going to sell it to Clive.”

“Sell?” Clive asked.

Humphrey gave his head an exasperated shake.

“I’m just glad you caught their priest,” Neil said. “Handing him over got them off our back about your mother, Sophie.”

“For now,” Rufus said.

“Perhaps we should try questioning her?” Neil asked. “She’ll probably talk to you, Sophie.”

“Will the cloud house even let us?” Gary asked. “We aren’t even certain where it’s holding her.”

They had mapped out the new configuration of the cloud construct building and found large sections to which they had no access.

“Are we still calling it a house?” Neil asked. “It’s more of... I don’t know, a lair, maybe? That’s what you call where the villain lives, right?”

“He’s not a villain,” Humphrey insisted.

“He may not have turned the cloud house into the shape of his own head,” Travis said, “but you have to admit Jason has a lot of evil warlock vibes when he gets serious. Taika, you remember when he killed those superheroes with his mind on television? He just looked at them and they died.”

“That was pretty chilling, bro.”

“They were enemies,” Farrah said.

“I’m not saying they weren’t,” Travis said. “But a lot of people in my world are scared of him. I mean, a lot think he’s awesome, all dark powers and mystery, and most people probably think he’s a hero. / think he’s a hero. But he’s scary. When you’ve seen him fight armies of monsters and kill people – powerful people – just by looking at them, then even when he’s being friendly, he’s scary. Especially if he’s friendly while you point a gun at him and he’s telling you he’s going to steal the most powerful weapon on the planet. I’m just saying.”

“His essences are fairly sinister,” Neil said. “Blood, dark, sin and doom? His combination sounds like the Adventure Society should hunt him down.”

“That’s hardly a fresh observation,” Rufus said. “His combination is fine. We checked.”

“That’s the thing though, isn’t it?” Neil said. “I bet you took one look at what he had on hand and rushed to check.”

“That’s true; we did,” Gary admitted. “Most people go their whole lives without stumbling onto an essence and he found three within a few hours of arriving in our world.”

“That’s just because he’s an outworlder,” Rufus said. “They’re all like that.”

“And do all the outworlders get the drinking-baby-blood combination?” Neil asked.

“It doesn’t matter what his powers are,” Dawn said, entering through the door to join them on the large balcony terrace. “It matters what he does with them.”

Everyone pulled themselves up a little straighter in the presence of the diamond-ranker except Farrah and Humphrey. Farrah had spent months travelling with Jason and Dawn, while Humphrey had been standing straight in the first place.

“The time is drawing close for me to leave this world,” Dawn announced. “Any action I take has the potential of giving the Builder excuses to push the rules yet again.”

“You’re leaving before Jason recovers?” Farrah asked.

“No,” Dawn said. “Jason has made the inevitable spectacle of himself, to a greater degree than even I envisaged. At least until he wakes. I shall reside here in the cloud temple.”

“Temple?” Humphrey said. “That is a very loaded term.”

“Yet it is the one being used in the high-ranking circles, where it matters. It is also not inaccurate.”

“Great, Jason made a temple to himself,” Neil said. “You’d think I’d be surprised, but here we are. How big a mess are we in, now?”

“You will all be the focus of powerful forces now,” Dawn said. “My presence alongside you will exacerbate the attention you garner, but there is little point closing the gate once the heidel has already run off. That is an easy trade for the pressure it will shield you from. My presence will make the local powers restrict themselves to putting their eyes on you and not their hands.”

“How long do you think that will work?” Rufus asked.

“Jason will likely be in recovery through the rest of the monster surge and the Builder’s departure,” Dawn said. “I recommend you petition the Adventure Society to allow your team to decamp from Rimaros as soon as Jason is fit to travel. I have a very strong feeling they’ll say yes, and you would do well to put some distance between yourselves and the Sea of Storms for a while. Once Jason can turn the cloud temple into a vehicle, I will be strongly advising him to do exactly that and make use of it.”

“When you go,” Farrah asked, “will we see you again?”

“Yes,” Dawn said, “but not for some years. We need to talk about that before Jason wakes up.”