

## Chapter 544

### Bait and Switch

Hidden inside a mountain was the Order of Redeeming Light's submarine dock. There was a rare gathering of the order's local forces and four of the cell leaders were confronting their overall leader, Melody Jain, in front of everyone. She looked slightly confused as she looked at the other leaders. Her second in command, Sendira, stood beside her, as did the church representative to the order, Laront. Melody addressed the cell leaders.

"Caitlyn. Heston. Marika. Elise. Is there something you have to say?"

"We need to discuss the direction you are taking operations here in the Sea of Storms," Marika said.

"I assume your intention is to congratulate me for the success of the operation," Melody said. "Two clockwork kings in our possession and a clean extraction."

"Clean?" Marika asked, her expression incredulous. "We spent years establishing secure locations and infrastructure within the Sea of Storms, without the Storm Kingdom ever catching wind of us. Months developing operational readiness, all in preparation for the monster surge. Once it began, we worked painstakingly to suborn fortress towns and the essence users they contained so they could become purified converted. You just sacrificed two-thirds of that force and exposed the scope and nature of our operations in the course of a single day. And don't tell us this was about the clockwork kings. You only found out about them chasing after your daughter."

Anger crossed the face of Melody's second, Sendira, but Melody gestured her to silence before she spoke.

"That is only the beginning," Heston said, jumping into the gap left as Sendira failed to defend her leader. "Every cell here lost people today. Every one."

"Including my own," Melody said. "Sacrifices must be made."

"You think that losing your own people inspires confidence in your leadership?" Elise asked.

"I am the leader," Melody said. "This position was assigned to me. Your confidence should be in that. Or do you doubt the wisdom of the church's leadership?"

"We have been here for a long time," Caitlyn said. "Away from the church's eyes, we are concerned that you have lost sight of the true path."

"I am the church's eyes," Laront said. "Are you suggesting that I have been blinded?"

"We all know that you and Melody work very closely together," Heston said. "Perhaps that closeness has caused you to lose the perspective that a little distance would offer."

Laront narrowed his eyes.

"Be extremely cautious about the accusations you make," he warned. "Your soul belongs to Purity, but the means by which it comes to him remains an open question."

"Are you threatening me, priest?"

"Yes. Never forget that you were filth that I picked up, washed off and gave the privilege of serving the most pure. If you want to be returned to the garbage pile, I can quite readily have you chopped up and composted."

"Boy's," Melody said in the lightly scolding tone of a mother almost, but not quite at the limits of her tolerance. "Whatever contention there is between us, remember that we are ultimately one, under the pure god. We might disagree inside, but the enemies are outside."

Despite having stepped forward to challenge Melody, Caitlyn, Elise and Marika all nodded their agreement. Looking slightly sheepish, Laront and Heston took both a literal and figurative step back.

"Now," Melody said. "Since there seems to be tension born of dissatisfaction with how this operation has been conducted, let's discuss it and see if we cannot clear the air. Firstly, I would like to address the issue of expending the lives of our members and the bulk of the pure converted on this operation. The loss of order members is, of course, unfortunate. It is, however, an unfortunate necessity."

"So you say," Caitlyn said. "This operation was reckless."

"The operation was essential," Melody said. "If our goal was to collect a small force of pure converted, we would have taken them and left already. Do you truly believe that the years, people and resources the order has poured into this region are worth a paltry contingent of cannon fodder?"

Caitlyn met Melody's gaze, but not steadily.

"Of course not," she said.

"Our goal," Melody announced to the group at large, "is not to collect a small force or even to build an army. It is to give the church the means to not just build an army but to keep building armies. This world is unclean. So unclean that we have been forced to work with a taint like the Builder just to prepare it for cleansing. The challenges ahead are great and our enemies overwhelming. We cannot hedge our bets or take half measures. Only boldness can light this world's path out of the darkness."

Melody gestured at the clockwork kings.

"These are the key. The answer to what brought us here and the next step forward. They are worth more than any number of pure converted. And yes, they are worth some of our lives. All of our lives, if that sacrifice delivers a weapon to our god that will help him purify this world. We had only one chance to seize this key and that is exactly what we did. What we have achieved today came at a cost, yes, but it is the price of triumph."

"These are all very fine ideals," Marika said, "but are you truly holding to them, Melody? We didn't find out about the clockwork kings because we were looking for them. What we were looking for was a way to get our hands on was your daughter and only stumbled on news of the kings because she was going after them. Would you have risked raiding the island if she wasn't there?"

"I would," Melody said. "My daughter's presence was irrelevant."

"Is that so?" Elise asked. "Then why was almost half of our force on the island pushed into a confrontation to snatch her and bring her back? The most costly conflict, all for one person."

"Things are not as you say they are," Melody said, although her voice lacked its previous certainty, emboldening her challengers.

"You can say what you like," Heston said, "but words are easy. The proof is in your actions. So many of our forces have failed to return, but your daughter is being carried to us as we speak."

One of the submarines surfaced at the dock and Heston laughed.

"Perfect timing," he said. "Let us see the degree to which Melody places her desires over the order's ideals."

The front of the submarine opened up and voices emerged, mid-conversation.

"...just a piece of cardstock with information printed on it, folded into thirds. It's a great way of efficiently disseminating information and you can print a bunch of them cheaply."

"And some guy from Vitesse gave it to you?"

"Yeah, he was hunting some energy vampire. I have no idea how someone like that got involved in the amphora business..."

Rhett and Jaime came wandering out of the submarine, onto the ramp that led up to the dock platform. They stopped, their conversation trailing off as they noticed all the people staring at them.

"Uh, hey boss," Rhett said. "Um, that Asano guy took our prisoner."

"He was really sneaky," Jaime added.

Sendira pinched the bridge of her nose, letting out a quiet groan.

"You lost her daughter?" Heston asked incredulously.

"Her?" Jaime said. "We grabbed a guy. What's this about a—"

"That's enough," Melody told them. "Just go join the others."

Rhett and Jaime awkwardly made their way up the ramp, under the gaze of the order's leadership. They joining the rank and file of Melody's cell, standing off to the side.

"I'm afraid you got the wrong vessel," Sendira told Heston. "The vessel containing our primary target was directed to take extra precautions in returning to the dock, so it will be the last to arrive."

There was an awkward silence amongst the leaders as they waited for the last vessel to arrive. Their various cells whispered amongst themselves, some more quietly than others.

"...and they called me mad, which I thought was terrific."

"Rhett, you're being too loud."

"Oh, thanks, pal."

"I'm not judging you. I'm saying everyone can hear you and now they're all looking at us again."

Rhett and Jaime looked around at the group, pointedly not meeting Sendira's gaze.

"Oh, look!" Jaime said as he pointed at the water. "The last vessel is here."

Their shoulders slumped with relief as all attention turned to the newly arrived submarine.

"You need to learn to modulate your voice," Jaime whispered.

"You know I've never been good at talking without breathing."

"Have you been doing the exercises I showed you?"

"Yes, I've been doing the exercises."

"Regularly?"

"We've been very busy. You know Sendira always makes me wash the clockwork king. Do you know how hard it is to degrease that thing?"

"You worship the god of Purity. You can't get a good detergent?"

"I had a guy smuggling crystal wash out of the city but he said someone bought up all the excess supply."

They noticed Sendira staring at them again and fell silent.

Another vessel docked and two more people emerged from it. This time only one was a member of the order while the other was hooded, collared and shackled, arms bound behind his back. The order member shoving him up the ramp was a fierce-looking woman with pale skin, red hair and green eyes.

"Thank you, Kelleigh," Melody said as the woman delivered the prisoner to stand in front of the assembled leaders. Kelleigh then joined the rest of Melody's cell.

"Where's your prisoner?" she asked Rhett and Jaime quietly.

"That Asano guy took him," Jaime said.

"What did I tell you when we split up?"

"Shush," Rhett said, pointing to where Sendira was removing the prisoner's hood.

"Who in Purity's name is this?" Heston asked.

"Isn't Purity's name Purity?" Rhett asked, earning him an elbow jab from Kelleigh.

Fortunately for Rhett, the leadership's attention was on the shackled man in front of them.

"Meet Gibson Amouz," Melody said. "Son of Lord Cassin Amouz and heir to the seat of House Amouz."

"This isn't your daughter," Elise asked.

"No," Melody said. "It isn't."

"But the whole point of the operation was to grab your daughter," Caitlyn said.

"This does seem to be an idea you have all latched on to," Melody said. "I'm really not sure where it came from. Sendira, have you been telling people we were going after my daughter?"

"No, Melody. I only ever referred to the target as the target, for operational security purposes. I became aware, during the operation, that the order members with me believed the target to be your daughter. As acquiring the target was outside of their designated tasks, I declined from correcting them."

"I think I'm starting to see why you all have questions regarding my priorities," Melody said. "You believed that I was using the order's resources to bring in my daughter. This would be inappropriate, of course, for while I would certainly like to see my daughter redeemed, the order's purpose cannot be subjugated to any personal agenda. Where you got the idea that I would do so, I cannot imagine."

The expressions of the four cell leaders that had stepped up to question Melody's authority ranged from carefully controlled to poisonous, but they all realised that they had been played. Melody had artfully manipulated them into challenging her in front of all their people on spurious grounds, undermining any further attempts they might make to challenge her going forward.

For her part, Melody continued to twist the knife.

"Young Master Amouz, here," she explained, "is heir to House Amouz, as previously mentioned. House Amouz controls or has an interest in more than half of the mining

operations in the Sea of Storms, including the bulk of high-rank mineral acquisition. The reason we have put such time and care into capturing him – in the course of which we discovered our new clockwork kings – is for the next stage of our plans."

"Building constructs," Marika said.

"Precisely," Melody said. "Pure converted are all well and good but they also come with certain problems. One is the need to obtain essence users as material, and the other is that their capabilities are rather lacking in variety. Building our own constructs will alleviate this, and the materials required for each construct are both cheap and easy to obtain, relatively speaking."

Melody's speech was for the benefit of the rank and file, who were usually given more orders than explanations. The cell leaders knew exactly what needed to be done and why.

"The problem with setting up a construct factory," Melody continued, "is that while the materials for individual constructs are unexceptional, the facility itself requires quite an initial outlay that is rather more extravagant. Young Master Amouz, here, and the family secrets he will soon be sharing, is the solution to our problems in this regard."