

Chapter 871

Not Enough For Forever

“...can’t believe you didn’t tell me,” Zara continued, as she had been doing since Greenstone.

“You would have insisted on participating,” Sophie said. “We couldn’t allow that.”

“I may only be a temporary member of this team,” Zara said, “but—”

“It’s been two years,” Belinda said. “You can stop telling people you’re a temporary member every single time.”

“And part of being in the team is adhering to your role,” Neil said, looking off the side with an innocent expression. “Even if we only tell you what your role was afterwards.”

The four were in a sidewalk café in Pranay, a portal stopover point on the way to Estercost. Pranay was the last of the isolated city-states they would visit for a while, with Estercost being a large and densely-populated kingdom. It was the homeland of many of their friends, and the land from which Greenstone was colonised centuries earlier.

While the rest of the team were off at a nearby market, the four were sipping iced tea in the welcome shade of the café’s awning.

“You excluded me from the robbery because of my family, didn’t you?” Zara asked.

“Heist,” Sophie corrected.

“What?” Zara asked.

“It wasn’t a robbery,” Sophie said. “It was a heist.”

“Isn’t a heist a kind of robbery?” Zara asked.

Sophie and Belinda shared a long-suffering look before shaking their heads and giving up.

“Fine,” Zara said. “The reason you kept me out of the *heist* was because of my family, wasn’t it?”

“Of course that’s why,” Neil said. “The political ramifications of raiding the archive vault—”

“Allegedly,” Belinda qualified.

“Of *allegedly* raiding the archive vault,” Neil corrected, “will be bad enough as it is. They’ll know it was us, regardless of what they can prove.”

He looked over at Belinda.

“They won’t be able to prove it, right?”

“No,” she said, her voice full of affront. “And I’d appreciate it if people would stop asking that.”

“She doesn’t like it when people doubt her heist credentials,” Sophie said with a smile.

“Just your association with us will complicate things,” Neil told Zara. “If people start to think you actually participated, it will be much worse. That’s why my job was making sure you had a nice visible alibi. In a place where they’d checked for illusion magic and shape-shifting, as well, so no one can claim it wasn’t you.”

“It wasn’t easy convincing the venue to ramp up security so they’d check for that either,” Belinda said. “I had to threaten to—”

“Probably best you don’t tell them what you threatened,” Sophie said.

“It’s not a problem,” Belinda said. “I made sure all the alchemical bombs were easy to find.”

“Wait, there were actual bombs?” Sophie asked.

“What was I meant to do?” Belinda asked. “Bluff?”

“YES!” Sophie and Neil exclaimed together.

“Well, I know that now,” Belinda said. “You don’t have to yell. Look, the others are back.”

They watched as Humphrey, Clive and Estella Warnock approached along the crowded market-day street. The pink-haired celestine spy snagged a chair from a neighbouring table and slid in next to Belinda.

Estella had been working more directly with the team since their return from the subterranean expedition. The lack of a luxurious cloud vehicle to hang back in required her to move and live more closely with the group. Having her close at hand had proven useful as an effective urban scout had become increasingly valuable.

Adventuring work traditionally involved a lot of trudging through the wilderness to hunt monsters. Danger in isolated regions was nothing new, but now the cities were suffering greater threats as well. In the wake of the monster surge, the Builder invasion and now the messenger invasion, messenger spies, leftover cultists and intelligent monsters were all lurking dangers.

Even without external threats, simple overpopulation was causing problems. The extended monster surge had been bad enough, but many people either couldn’t go home or had no home left to go to. That led to housing and resource shortages, with more food required and less coming in from abandoned farmlands. City infrastructure was overtaxed and mundane criminal enterprises flourished as people focused on magical threats.

Estella’s skills might be little use once the fighting started but, in a city, finding the fight was often most of the job. Her ability to navigate the physical and cultural geography

of a city's darker corners had proven useful time and again, and an excellent complement to Sophie and especially Belinda's own skills.

"What were you two yelling about?" Estella asked Neil as she, Humphrey and Clive joined the group.

"Neil was complaining about getting dumped again," Belinda told her.

"I was not..."

Neil closed his eyes and took in a long breath and let it out slowly.

"Nope," he said. "Not going to bite."

"We should get moving anyway," Humphrey said. "Especially if we're going to detour to Kazlahk."

Belinda and Estella shared an awkward look.

"Yeah," Belinda said, her voice slightly strained. "Let's get going."

Kazlahk was a city of sandstone, palm trees and money. A coastal city situated on the eastern border of Estercost, it was surrounded by desert. As with Greenstone, the empty desert was a premium site for spirit coin farms, although the higher magic made for more valuable denominations.

Kazlahk's spirit coins and prime location for sea trade made for a lot of wealth. Massive houses belonging to coin barons and major adventuring families lined the gorgeous beaches. The pristine water was a welcome balm from the region's famously scalding climate.

There were a few sites abutting the beach that weren't private homes, including a luxury resort for visiting merchants, adventurers and nobility. The most notable was the Kazlahk University of Medicine. Most schools and research centres dedicated to healing focused on essence and ritual magic, with alchemy lagging in distant third.

The main reason for that focus was funding. While the Church of the Healer contributed, the bulk of the money came to such institutions from the Magic Society and the Adventure Society. As a result, their studies and research focused on what was of most use to their benefactors.

KazMed was a prominent exception, focused on the advancement and practical application of alchemical medicine. While part of their funding still originated with the Church of the Healer, most came from a large alliance of trade associations. Such groups were the largest employers of essence users outside of the Adventure Society, but most of the healers became adventurers.

While not adventurers, the essence users hired to escort trade convoys through the wilds faced genuine danger. From sea monsters to sky pirates, the most active ones faced as many monsters and bandits as some adventurers. A lack of healers amongst them, however, made cost-effective healing options essential. This had been the impetus for founding a school where graduates wouldn't be snatched away by the Adventure Society.

KazMed had recently completed construction of a new research centre, the School of Alchemical Efficiency. While the university had found success in producing alchemists focused on healing, it had fallen short on some of its core intentions. The research centre was designed to rectify that by advancing cost-efficient alchemy. The new school would do this through the twin approach of well-funded research in the field and a new wave of alchemists who would focus on it.

Belinda made her way nervously through the campus alone. The buildings were widely spaced, with flagstone pathways and gardens of palms and hardy desert plants. The sounds of the nearby shore were carried on a breeze with the scent of the sea, not as dry as the air deeper into the city.

She reached an administration building for the School of Alchemical Efficiency and asked for the location of the dean. She was given directions to a large building that looked a little different to the others. There were no windows, and the sandstone walls were covered in reinforcing metal bands, engraved with sigils. The roof was covered with chimneys, like a metal garden.

Belinda found herself compelled to examine the sigils set into the reinforcing metal of the walls. It was intricate and complex work and she was certain they would have needed a formation interactivity specialist in the design. Such specialists were rare and their services expensive.

She shook her head.

"You're stalling," she muttered to herself. "Time to face the music, Callahan."

She headed for the large doors leading into the building, a sign above them denoting the building as housing the student labs. She asked the receptionist inside where she could find the dean.

"He's in one of the labs with first years right now. You should probably wait."

"I've put this off longer than I should," Belinda said. "I'm done waiting."

"Alright, just hang on a moment."

The receptionist took a sheet of paper from under his desk and started reading in a monotone voice.

“The Kazlahk University of Medicine and the School of Alchemical Efficiency accepts no responsibility for burns, poisonings, flayings, melted body parts—”

“Flayings?”

“There’s a devices used to mix large containers of liquid in a specific way,” the receptionist explained. “It’s a metal orb with numerous thin wires extruding from it. There was an incident involving someone’s frenzy spider familiar.”

Belinda was forced to listen to the whole thing before the receptionist sent her looking for laboratory six, but soon enough she was standing outside a pair of metal doors. They were reinforced with further metal, heavy bands etched with strengthening sigils. Some of the reinforcement on one door appeared newer than the rest while the other looked to have been recently replaced in its entirety.

There were no handles to open them. Touch plates beside the doors would only unlock them for those of silver-rank and above. The receptionist had told her that anyone likely to die in an explosion was only allowed access under supervision. Belinda only hesitated a moment before pressing her hand to the panel.

The doors slid aside with a hiss, letting out a sickly yellow haze. Inside was a large room in an amphitheatre style, with tiers rising up from a stage at the front. Instead of seating, however, individual alchemy stations were set up.

The yellow haze lingered heavier around the high ceiling. It was being actively extracted through vents while more vents near the floor pumped clean air in, setting the haze into a swirl. There was a group of students all gathered on the stage where the air was clearest. In front of them, Jory was speaking in the ‘not angry but disappointed’ voice normally reserved for mothers.

“...come to my attention, Trent, that your repeated concoction of noxious gas is not as accidental as it would appear.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, professor.”

“No?” Jory asked, his tone offering the boy enough rope.

“No, Professor.”

“It’s just a coincidence, then, that each of your premature eruptions are perfectly timed so that the evacuation lets you bump into Miss Katarina Anwan of the Body Reinforcement Department as she leaves her Skeletal Transfiguration lecture? Not to mention giving you a handy topic of conversation.”

“Professor Tillman—”

“I am going to explain the situation in which you find yourself, young man. Know that while I do so, there is no noise your mouth is capable of producing that will do anything but make that situation worse. Take my advice then, and keep that mouth closed.”

Jory waited for the student to make a bad choice, but realisation was dawning on the young man’s face. After a long, awkward moment, Jory continued.

“You lack the courage required to talk to a girl without concocting an elaborate scheme, yet easily muster the courage to sabotage my classes. That, Trent, tells me everything I need to know about what you value amongst the opportunities this institution offers. You are a transparent little boy.”

Trent’s good judgement in staying silent didn’t last. Rather than being cowed, his expression grew angry as Jory berated him.

“My parents—”

“No doubt paid considerable money to get you here,” Jory interrupted. “As I have had the misfortune of grading your work, I’m certain you didn’t arrive in my class on the basis of academic merit. I was halfway inclined to allow you to continue, should you show any contrition after being confronted on your behaviour. What you have instead demonstrated is an attitude that is beyond the scope of my ability to correct. So, collect your things, leave this room and do not darken my door again without the signed testimonial of multiple staff that you have changed your entire personality.”

Trent looked like he was about to haul off on Jory when another student put his hand on Trent’s shoulder. He wheeled on the other student but his anger vanished on seeing who it was. The other student shook his head and Trent stomped away in a huff.

Trent stomped up the stairs and cleared off his alchemy station. He shoved his possessions into a dimensional bag before storming back down, past Belinda and out of the lab.

Everyone in the room watched in silence until the sliding doors closed behind him. Jory, whose back had been to the door, finally noticed Belinda’s presence. His eyes went wide for a moment before he turned back to his students. When he spoke, his voice was softer, the anger and disappointment replaced with tiredness.

“I am aware,” he said, “that Trent lacked the expertise to so precisely spoil his practical work time after time. I know that he had help in this, but I have no interest in throwing good students out with the bad. I will simply express my hope that whoever it may have been...”

His gaze settled on one very nervous looking young man.

“...they are more considered in how they attempt to advance their social standing in the future. Your time at this institution is one of transition. You are here to learn more than just how to brew potions and heal the sick. This is your opportunity to go from children playing games to serious adults learning serious things for serious reasons. But it is up to you to claim that opportunity. Over the next few years, you have a choice to make, and you will make it through your actions. When you are done here, will you be as children, nestled under the protective wings of your families? Or will you step into the world as adults deserving of respect, ready to stand on your own and make your marks on the world?”

His expression softened and his voice lightened as he continued.

“That’s not to say you can’t have fun, or that mistakes will not be forgiven. You should have fun, and this is the best chance you will ever have to make mistakes and learn from them.”

He glanced up at Trent’s empty work station.

“For those not paying attention, ‘learn from them’ was the important part of that sentence. Because that’s what you’re here for: to learn. We don’t expect you to walk in here knowing everything about how the world works. I can promise that if you think you did, you were wrong.”

He glanced back at Belinda before returning his gaze to his students.

“You don’t know it all,” he told them. “You never will. I don’t. The woman behind me doesn’t, and she’s the smartest person in this room and almost every room she’s ever been in. She’s walked with diamond-rankers and watched mortals battle gods, yet she’s only just figured out that she should have broken up with me years ago. We all have more to learn, and in your time here, the most valuable thing you can learn is how to learn more.”

He let out a long, cleansing breath.

“That, however, is the broad perspective. In specific, there will also be a lot of making potions, and Trent’s little experiment has mostly vented out. So, I want all of you to take what remains of our time and show me a workable potion base by the end of the session.”

He stood looking at them as they stared blankly back.

“That means go do it now,” he told them, not hiding his exacerbation. The students started scrambling for their alchemy stations. Jory turned and looked at Belinda with a grin on his face. He walked over, reached into his pocket and a privacy screen shimmered into place, muffling the sound and blurring them to those outside it.

"I can't leave them in here alone," he said. "You'll have to do this with a gaggle of teenagers watching us."

"You know why I'm here," she said.

"I've known this day was coming since the start. It was always me more than you, Lindy. I know you care for me, but not enough for forever. And we've lived different lives for a long time, now. How many times a year do we see each other? I'm the settling down type, but Greenstone was always a trap for you."

"You're not in Greenstone either," Belinda pointed out.

"No, but I'm always looking for a place to settle in. You always have an eye on the door. You need someone who can travel the world with you. Get in trouble, have adventures. We both know that's not me. I hope the new person you've found can be that for you."

"What makes you think—"

"You're a better person than you think, Lindy. You're loyal, and you're kind, whatever you might want the world to think. That's why this conversation hasn't happened earlier, and why it's happening now. You've found someone, but you don't want to start with them until you've ended things cleanly with me."

He reached out and gently wiped a tear from her face.

"Don't be sad," he said. "There are no surprises here. What we had was good, but it was never going to last."

"Then why didn't you end it?"

He looked at her as if she had missed something blindingly obvious.

"Because you're amazing," he said. "I was never going to give you up for as long as you would have me. I know we haven't seen each other a lot in the last few years, but I don't regret a single one of those precious moments."

Belinda looked like she'd been slapped.

"Then why not try and change my mind?" she asked.

"Because loving you means wanting what's best for you. And that isn't me, however much I might want it to be."

She let out a crying laugh.

"Well, now I just feel crappy," she said. "Why do you have to be so... decent?"

"It's just how I am. And we both know that decent isn't what you're looking for, Lindy. It's just what you told yourself you should. But you're not Sophie. You don't want someone to be better with. You want someone to be clever and devious with. Frankly, sometimes, I

felt more like your father than your lover. Which did make me feel a little creepy from time to time.”

“Is that why you freaked out that time I called you—”

“Yes,” Jory said. “You remember that we’re in a room full of students, right?”

“They can’t hear us.”

“Even so, I feel a professional responsibility to not discuss bedroom matters in front of them.”

She smiled at him, eyes still wet with tears.

“I should go,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “I should check on my charges before one of them accidentally makes a bomb. Again.”

They shared a last, long look in silence. Belinda brushed a hand lightly against Jory’s chest, then moved to walk out of the privacy screen.

“Belinda,” he said. She stopped and turned around.

“He’s a lucky man,” Jory said. “Don’t ever let him think otherwise.”

Looking guilty, Belinda left. She opened the sliding doors and when they closed behind her, Jory finally let his expression break. Tears ran down his face and he let them flow for a minute as he stood in place, head bowed. Then he took out a handkerchief, wiped them away and put it back in his pocket. He took an eyedropper from his jacket, putting a drop in each eye to eliminate how bloodshot he knew they would be. After schooling his expression, he dropped the privacy screen and went to check on his students.

Belinda found Estella waiting outside the main campus gate, looking nervous.

“How did it—”

Belinda cut her off by rushing forward and wrapping her arms around her. It wasn’t amorous, just a need for comfort.

“I feel so crappy,” she mumbled into Estella’s shoulder.

“Did he make it hard?”

“No. He made it easy, but he’s never been good at aura control. I could feel his emotions crumbling the whole time.”

“You had to do it.”

“I know. He knew. But I hurt him.”

“It was never going to be easy. But it’s done now.”

Estella stepped back, put her hands on Belinda's shoulders and looked her square in the eye.

"It's done now," she said again. "Which means I can finally do this."

She grabbed Belinda and pulled her in for a lingering, passionate kiss. When they finally separated, Belinda started laughing.

"Oh, you found that funny, did you?" Estella asked.

"No, it's just... I was told to tell you you're a lucky man."