

Chapter 535

Opportunists

The Order of Redeeming Light had long travelled using underwater vehicles that were neither fast nor efficient but were very hard to detect. As such, they were able to avoid detection by the scouts watching the Builder island until they had almost arrived, their vessels surfacing shortly before beaching against the crumbling stonework shore. The vehicles looking like large, flat whales of green metal.

One of the vehicles pushed up against a point where the canted angle of the city had raised ground level several metres into the air. A massive hole smashed in the exterior had produced a rough ramp of rubble, the bottom of which the vehicle arrived at.

Only a few of the people from each boat were members of the order. Their purpose was to lead the rest, which the order was calling pure servitors. Once essence users from various fortress towns, they had been implanted with purified cores - voluntarily or otherwise – and were now obedient servants of the order.

The three order members vessel emerged one after another, leaving the servitors behind for the moment. Their silver-rank reflexes, balance and coordination meaning the rubble incline was no challenge to them.

“This entire operation is reckless,” said Fila, who was in the middle of the three. “There are gold rankers here. Stealth specialists, no less. They could be anywhere.”

“Then maybe shut up before they hear you complaining,” said Ramona, bringing up the rear.

“Both of you be quiet,” Sendira ordered from the front. “Distraction and frivolity taint pure dedication of purpose.”

Sendira was not just the overall commander of the island raid but also the second-in-command of all the order’s forces in the Sea of Storms. Sendira did not deign to turn to look back while delivering her admonishment as the other two shared a glance. All three were from different cells of the order but the pair had found a swift camaraderie working under Sendira.

The Order of the Redeeming Light had operated using a cellular organisation long before the church of Purity fell. As one of the church’s most extreme wings, they had always been prepared to face religious persecution. It had served them well following the downfall of the church. As a result, the order’s operations in the Sea of Storms had an overall command structure but each cell had its own leadership.

Melody Jain was the overall leader of the order's local operations, along with her second, Sendira, and church advisor, Laront. As the overall leadership was the same silver rank as the individual cell leaders, there was a constant tension between them.

"You think we don't know why we were assigned with you specifically?" Ramona said to Sendira. "You don't want us interfering with your real objective."

"You might be telling us we're here for the clockwork kings," Fila added, "but we know that is just an afterthought. You only found out about the clockworks kings while setting up to kidnap Melody's daughter. Melody is using the presence of the kings as a pretence to expend the order's resources for her own ends."

"You picked us for your group because you don't want our commanders realising that Melody is using the order for herself instead of its true purpose," Ramona said. "While you're keeping an eye on us, Melody's blind little devotees can do the things she doesn't want us to see."

"Only Purity is worthy of our devotion, not his servants," Sendira told them. "We are all unworthy, seeking to cleanse the taint that lingers within us and keep ourselves from any more. To speak in ignorance and disobedience, both of which make you lesser, is to invite uncleanness of spirit into yourself. Your only concern here should be purity of purpose. Do as you are told and you shall lift yourselves in the eyes of the god."

"You talk down to us like a gold-ranker, Sendira, but you're not," Ramona said. "You're just someone who takes being holier-than-thou a little too literally."

The wing of the Order of Redeeming Light in the Sea of Storms didn't have any gold-rankers amongst them. The primary reason was that they didn't want to draw the kind of attention that gold-rankers inevitably brought. Even the most mundane of gold-rankers was the kind of potential threat to stability that people liked to keep track of, especially if those gold-rankers were operating outside of the Adventure Society.

It made sense, then, for the order to avoid having gold-rankers in their number when the goal was to operate without grabbing attention. Long before the fall of the Purity church, the Storm Kingdom had been aware of the Order of Redeeming Light's presence. Even with legitimate churches, their more extreme factions were worth paying attention to, but the local powers had remained unconcerned so long as the order had no one higher than silver rank. When local authorities came looking for them, the order's losses were minimal as their discretion allowed them to enact preparations made while they had gone long-overlooked. The absence of gold rankers had been a better shield than having gold-rankers to defend them.

Despite all this being true, many of the order's membership continued to disagree with the absence of gold rankers within their number. The leadership in other cells, being of no lower rank than Melody, had been a source of tension in terms of authority within the order. Respect for rank was ingrained across the cultures and religions of Pallimustus and many felt that Melody's resistance to a gold-rank presence was to avoid giving up power.

The trio reached the top of the rubble, passed through the hole in the wall and arrived on a sloping street, the flagstones cracked and pitted. Sendira finally turned to face the other two.

"Your only thoughts should be on the task you have been given," she admonished. "The disposition of the kidnap target is unrelated to your objectives. You do not understand what is in play or have any need to concern yourselves with her. Put any consideration of her aside and concentrate on the tasks you were given, not those given to others."

Fila and Ramona glowered but remained silent. They were angry but knew they just had to wait for Melody's poor choices to build the gallows for them. Attempting to kidnap a silver-rank adventurer from Rimaros, with the city's heightened state of awareness and frenzy of adventurer activity was a foolish endeavour. That was why Melody had Laront seeking out information so that they could grab her while she was out on a contract.

The first opportunity to grab the target had been the Adventure Society expedition to the island, which Melody had already rejected. It was close to Rimaros, there were multiple teams and a pair of gold-rankers. The realisation that there were clockwork kings of the island had changed the value proposition, however, pushing Melody onto action. This choice was not sitting well with many of her rivals.

"Once this operation is over," Fila said, "everyone will see that Melody is advancing her personal agenda and risking the order's assets, people and goals to do it. We'll see how arrogant you are then, Sendira."

"Yes," Sendira told them. "We will. Now, organise the pure servitors. The adventurers will seek to scout us out before acting and we need to move before they make an active response to our arrival."

The vast majority of the forces the order brought to the island were the pure servitors, implanted with purified cores. This was a reflection of the new disposition of the order's overall forces. True members of the order had all been purified in the fire of purgation, cleansing them of impurities, but the purifying flames were a limited and precious resource. They were not a feasible path to building the forces required for the war to come.

When the Order of Redeeming Light had established a branch in the Sea of Storms, it was with a specific purpose. They were one of many wings of the Purity church around

the world that had been making preparations for years, seeking ways to establish the kind of power that would soon be needed.

The test program carried out in the Sea of Storms was a collaboration with the Purity church's uneasy allies, the Builder cult. This made the Order of Redeeming Light, bearing the gift of their god's purifying flame, the obvious choice to judge the viability of the program. The order's very purpose was to take that which was unclean and purify it, redeeming it as a weapon against the impure.

The core of the program was a clockwork king that the Builder agreed to hand over to the church as part of a larger series of deals and concessions. The order subjected the automaton to the fire of purgation, wiping away the Builder's influence and claiming the entity for Purity. As a result, the clockwork king no longer produced the clockwork cores it once had. Instead, became a source of the purified cores the order had been using on the essence users of the fortress towns they suborned.

The order regretted that the purified cores were not as ideal a process of transfiguration as the fire of purgation, but what could compare to the power of the most pure and perfect god? The cores engendered a transformation in those that accepted them, which was ideal, or had them forcibly implanted, which was not. Forcible implantation often led to unfortunate, but not insurmountable, behavioural problems.

Forcibly implanted or not, the process rendered essences unusable, replacing their powers with lesser and not entirely predictable alternatives. These were weaker and less numerous than essence abilities but the implantation process raised the person implanted an entire rank. Given that the cores were generally used on garbage essence users, there was a net gain in power. The greatest regret the order had about the process was that, unlike the fire of purgation, the cores failed to purge the inhumanity of the tainted races.

The cores, however, were essential for the war to come. The church needed to replicate the Builder cult's power to rapidly build up its forces, even if those forces weren't ideal. So long as their troops were plentiful, pure and obedient, that was all that mattered. The cores commanded the absolute obedience of those in whom they were implanted, which was not something the order mentioned to volunteers.

The order had been infiltrating fortress towns while Rimaros was neglecting them. If the city wasn't neglecting them, the order made sure it felt like they were until the town's defenders were desperate enough to accept the order's overtures. Melody was exceptional at getting whole towns to take cores voluntarily, while other cells had mixed success.

Purity followers were famous for being exclusionary and judgemental, which was not an ideal attitude for winning people over. The current status of the church only made the challenge greater. When the essence users of a targeted town remained resistant to accepting cores, there was the other approach. Forcible implantation was less desirable, but remained acceptable.

The Builder cities moving to attack had been the perfect chance for the order to move openly on a number of their targeted towns. Volunteer essence users were brought away while more reluctant towns were forcibly converted. Only those who were able to die fighting instead of being taken alive were left behind. Either way, the civilians were massacred and the whole thing was disguised as monsters overrunning towns left vulnerable by adventurers too busy to support them.

The Adventure Society, being massively understaffed, had taken weeks to uncover the truth of what was happening. They were only just starting to realise that something more organised and sinister was happening to the fortress towns, although the culprits were obvious with the Purity loyalist's already having been identified as meddling in the region.

Now that the local powers were catching on to the order's activities, Melody had chosen to be more overt. She was willing to be more open using the assets the order had built up before the Adventure Society grasped the extent of what they were dealing with. This had been the impetus for having cells collaborate, moving in numbers, showing off their stealthy submarine transports and using the pure servitors to raid the island.

Having used the essence users of fortress towns as a large-scale test of the purity cores, the next step was to establish an infrastructure where what they had accomplished could be scaled up and spread beyond the Sea of Storms.

For that to be possible, the order needed more clockwork kings. Not only did they need to increase the production of pure cores but also have redundancies should any of them be lost to enemy action. As the Builder was unwilling to surrender more of the kings, the order would need to take them for themselves. The news of one or more kings being present on the island was an important opportunity, but acting at the same time as an Adventure Society expedition was a massive risk.

If clockwork kings were on the table they became the priority, with the chance to grab their original target being reduced to a welcome, but secondary, objective. The opportunity to accomplish both made raiding the island a significantly more worthwhile expenditure of resources. The Adventure Society would also soon have a better understanding of the order's activities and capabilities, so revealing them now was a minimal loss. The chance

to use the pure servitors en masse before the Storm Kingdom and the Adventure Society knew about them was not an opportunity that would last forever unused.

That was what finally drove Melody's decision to rapidly plan and execute the raid, even if the rush lent to unexpected variables. The pure servitors were always intended as disposable forces and there would not be a better opportunity to use them. This was what led to Sendira watching on as Fila and Ramona directed the pure servants off the boat to clamber up the rubble slope.

The pure servitors were a mix of ranks. Iron-rank essence users had become bronze when implanted with cores, while bronze had become silver and the silvers, gold. They were only equivalent to weak monsters of their rank but the gold-rank servitors were still a trump card that could well be the difference against the gold-rankers on the island. As such, each of the five landing parties had two gold servitors, representing a major portion of the order's overall strength.

"Melody is going to pay for wasting this many gold-rank servitors on snatching up her daughter," Ramona told Sendira.

"Even if we succeed," Fila added, "we're going to lose most of them. Maybe all. Is Melody ready to accept responsibility for that?"

"Melody is fully prepared to bear the responsibility for this operation," Sendira told them, unperturbed. "Her courage is pure. Can the opportunists you follow say the same?"