

Chapter 556

Coming in Hot

A mining complex lay not just deep beneath the surface but even below the sea floor itself. A sprawling network of facilities linked by a tangled web of tunnels contained a process that went from mining rare ores to refining them and finally transporting them to Rimaros and other cities throughout the Sea of Storms.

The submarine docking station was the only part of the complex not buried under the sea floor and had space for several extremely large vessels. Currently one such vessel was docked, along with five smaller ones. The smaller vessels looked something akin to flattened whales and were the stealthy vehicles used by the Order of Redeeming Light.

Ever since he first entered one of those vehicles, the connection between Shade and his other bodies had been blocked. The vehicles had powerful sense-blocking magic that made communication impossible, as did the Order of Redeeming Light's stronghold, where Shade had been dwelling in the days since the vehicle took him there. With the departure of the vehicles, Shade had the chance to leave the stronghold, once more hidden in the shadow of an order member.

Shade had no way of knowing where the stronghold was, which was also true for most of the order's own members. Part of the reason for the shielding on the vehicles was to prevent the information from being leaked should any of the order be captured and somehow compelled to talk, or even simply eavesdropped upon.

The docking station was a vast, open complex with many support structures to secure it against the weight of water pressing in. Magical architecture normally used magic in place of such measures, but the sheer mass of the sea above warranted additional measures in order to maintain such an large and open space in the depths.

The reason for the space was that it was a loading bay that could handle multiple large transports being loaded simultaneously, which had paused as the unexpected vessels docked and the order members emerged. The first targets they went for were the silver-rank guards that had been added for security by Cassin Amouz after discovering his sone had been taken.

The first thing the guards attempted to do was trigger an aura beacon they had been supplied in case of attack, but the order had already anticipated such a move. The first the guards learned of the order's approach was a wave of artificial aura suppression; the inverse of the artificial aura projection of the beacon. This was a function of the stealth vessels, extending the effect of their sense-blocking magic, albeit at a hefty cost.

The suppression effect was energy-hungry and couldn't be maintained for long, but it was long enough. Between the number of facilities in need of protection and the inability to spare too many silver-rankers during a surge, the silver-rank guards were too few in number. When five vessels disgorged Purity-worshipping raiders, they overwhelmed the guards with numbers and shut down the beacon before the suppressive effect was exhausted.

The order moved immediately to attack the startled labourers and supervisors, all of whom were iron or bronze-rank. They had scattered immediately when the order attacked, fleeing deeper into the complex while the order dealt with the guards. The order had tried to stop them all but the guards sacrificed themselves valiantly to protect the workers, allowing around half to flee deeper into the mining facility. Most of those managed to escape due to the complex nature of the facility and the fact that aura senses were extremely stifled by the sea floor from which most of the complex had been dug.

In the chaos, Shade slipped from the shadow of the order member he was hiding in and into one of the many shadows around the docking area. There was no shortage of them, cast by strings of glow stones dangling from the high ceiling.

The moment that the aura suppression of the vehicle dropped, he was no longer restrained by their powerful sense-blocking magic and he was once again connected to his other selves. The memories of his other bodies flooded in, like a long-forgotten experience suddenly and vividly brought back by a nostalgic smell. Shade's other bodies likewise gained the memories he had obtained while hidden in the order's stronghold.

In the submarine dock, Jason stepped out of Shade's body behind a stack of wooden crates twice his height. He restrained his aura so as not to be detected, but the strength of his senses still was enough to take in his surroundings. There were lingering auras of the facility workers in front of the large transport vessel, as well as scattered where they ran before the Order of Redeeming Light cut them down. The only living people in the large dock were a team of four order members, apparently guarding the facility's only means of retreat.

Jason's senses only penetrated a few rooms into the facility before they were blocked. Carved directly from the stone under the sea floor, something about the material seemed to impede magical senses. It wasn't an artificial installation but a natural property of the stone.

"What's blocking my senses?" Jason asked quietly. Shade's power to hide Jason from different senses prevented Jason's voice from being audible, except to Shade

himself. Even activating a privacy screen would be sensed by the order members in the dock, let alone if he spoke aloud. Their silver-rank spirit attributes have them senses sharp enough to pick up even a whisper.

“Deep granite,” Shade responded. “It’s a cost-effective means of blocking low to mid-rank senses, so they likely quarry the stone itself, along with the ores located in this area. It normally wouldn’t block senses as strong as yours but when its metres thick, even you won’t be able to sense more than a room or two away.”

“Will it be enough to stop portals and communication powers?”

“Yes. Likely your mapping power as well, although your aura strength may be able to push all of these abilities further than most.”

“We’ll have to portal everyone into this room and go chasing the order, then, instead of deploying them strategically around the facility.”

“That is the case, yes.”

“You’re briefing Liara?”

“Yes. She is readying portal specialists and teams as I do so, including the special team you requested.”

“She actually had them? I only took a punt and asked because she’d been juggling the Builder infiltrators. There’s really a whole team?”

“Yes. She is assigning them to securing the dock, as the only egress point, be that via portal or transport vessel.”

“I have to admire the long-term thinking, although it’s dangerous letting them just float around.”

“Yet, her efforts will seem to pay off,” Shade said. “Once she heard Miss Belinda’s plan, Lady Liara was willing to play this particular card.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “You spread out through the facility and scout. We won’t be able to communicate except at short ranges, but that’s a lot better than walking around blind. I’m going to head back; you keep one body here for me to jump to. Once I open an actual portal, there’ll be no hiding it from the people on guard here.”

Shade bodies started emerging from Jason and vanishing into the shadows. Jason stepped into one of them and vanished.

Baseph Rimaros urged his subordinates to hurry as he ushered them into the safe room, then sealed it behind them. There were a number of such rooms around the facility and he hoped supervisors were getting their people inside. They were designed to survive

the facility flooding rather than a raid, but they were strong, secure and had the magic resources to sustain the occupants for days until rescue arrived.

Baseph didn't go in himself, needing to do his best to make sure that rescue came. He had an aura beacon that could signal his wife, but it wouldn't work in most of the facility. It would only alert her to trouble, not the nature of it, but he trusted her to be careful as well as decisive. He had never expected to use the thing, but now he would need to reach the dock in order to trigger it, which was no safe bet.

There was a good chance that it wouldn't even work, should he make it safely to the dock. One of the panicked personnel who prompted Baseph to order the staff into the safe rooms had told him that the signal beacons of the guards had been somehow disabled. Even so, Baseph needed to try. If no one found out what was happening quickly, there was a very real chance that once they did, nothing but corpses would remain.

Under the very uncertain assumption that he could signal for help, Baseph would continue to try and help his people after. It was his responsibility to protect the facility personnel from the white-clad killers roaming the tunnels, as best he could. His best wasn't great – he had no illusions about that – but he would do what he could.

Baseph has already run into some of the raiders, who spotted and chased him until he escaped following a terror-filled scramble. If not for his comprehensive understanding of the facility's warren-like tunnel system, he would have been caught and probably killed already. He had whispered a prayer of thanks to the goddess of Knowledge before continuing on his way, moving swiftly but cautiously onward.

Liara was rapidly marshalling forces, collecting silver-rank teams in one of the Adventure Society's marshalling yards. Unfortunately, she had no access to a gold-ranker who both had a portal ability and had been to the facility. This meant that she would be using silver-rankers exclusively until a gold-ranker could reach the facility the long way.

Two specialised in operating underwater were already on route and would arrive in less than an hour. That would be little comfort to the people already dying from the Purity worshipper's raid, so the silver-ranker's being sent immediately were crucial.

As the team assembled, Shade was continuing to brief Liara of what he had discovered while trapped in the enemy stronghold. Liara hadn't waited once she realised what was happening, allowing Shade to fill her in while she organised a response.

“...specific materials, in order to build their own version of the Builder's construct factory. They intend to purge the mining complex's personnel, leaving only enough to load

what they need. They chose the timing from information I believe they obtained from their prisoner, Gibson Amouz.”

“Speaking of which...” Liara said, looking up to where Cassin Amouz was descending like a missile. He landed hard enough to crack the flagstone under his feet, which immediately started repairing itself. Adventure Society marshalling yards were always built to handle abuse.

Cassin looked at Liara and then at Shade standing next to her.

“You’re the one who has seen my son?” he demanded. Liara immediately activated a privacy screen.

“I have not seen your son,” Shade said. “I have been in a location where your son is being held.”

“Where is he?”

“I do not know, I am sorry,” Shade said. “I am confident, however, that he is still alive.”

“Tell me where—”

Cassin stepped menacingly at Shade only for another figure to step out of the shadowy body. It was a small man, draped in blood red adventuring robes and an impossibly dark cloak. From within the hood, a pair of alien eyes looked out. Cassin was taken aback by his inability to sense any aura from the man standing right in front of him.

“I understand your distress, Lord Amouz,” Jason said. “We don’t know where your son is – yet. The zealots are very careful about giving out information.”

“Put me in a room with one and they’ll talk.”

“No they won’t, sir,” Jason said, “and I think you know that. A plan is in progress to determine the location of their main facility, expose it and rescue your son.”

“And that plan is...?”

“In progress,” Jason said. “And as time is of the essence, we should get to it, yes?”

“I know who you are, Jason Asano. I’ve heard stories and rumours. Are you as good as what I’ve heard implies.”

“Yes.”

Cassin gave a short, sharp nod, then held out a small, ovoid crystal.

“Magic map of the complex. You have a mapping ability?”

Jason took the crystal, which immediately dissolved in his hand.

“I do.”

“Please find my son.”

Jason pushed the hood back to reveal his face.

“I’ll do my best, Lord Amouz. And my best is pretty bloody good.”

Moments later, Liara was explaining the plan to the assembled teams, each of which was made up of guild elites, including the rest of Jason’s team. There was also a handful of portal users.

“Each team will have a map and an assignment,” Liara announced. “Team Scouring Wind will secure the dock while other teams have designated target locations. Seek out and secure base personnel while eliminating any and all opposition. Standing orders to prioritise capture if possible are rescinded for the duration of this mission. Put them down and get the people out safely.”

Liara started assigning target locations on a map of the complex projected from a crystal. Her assistant, Rodney, was distributing more maps. He handed out both magical ones like Jason was given, for those with navigation powers, plus projected ones like Liara was using, one per team.

“As you can see,” Liara continued, “the facility is extremely complex. Anyone with navigation power will fare better than those using a projected map, so follow their lead if your team has one. Those teams have been assigned the deepest target locations. Be aware that your magical senses will be significantly impaired. You’ll be relying on your eyes and your ears on this one.”

With a gesture, she expanded the dock area of the map.

“We have one portal user who can open a portal to our target location,” Liara continued. “This is the only location where portals will work. He will open the portal, letting other portal users through, who will immediately open more portals to let our people through. Be aware that there are hostiles who will know the moment the first portal opens, so no dicking around. Move fast and clean, the moment the second set of portals open because you will be coming in hot. My husband is one of the civilians we need to rescue, so if I see so much as a hint of guild rivalry nonsense slowing this operation down, I will personally execute everyone involved right here in this marshalling yard, is that clear?”

Without waiting for a response, she turned to Jason.

“Go.”

Chapter 557

We Are Fighting Monsters

Jason returned to the submarine dock, again emerging from Shade's body, behind the high stack of crates. He immediately strode out from behind the stack, the opposite of hiding as his aura flooded out. Its oppressive presence masked the appearance of the portal that rose behind him, still hidden by the crates. Four Purity worshippers and twice that number of the pure converted immediately turned to look as he stepped out boldly to march in their direction.

The enemy didn't immediately rush to the attack, looking around cautiously for further enemies. Jason didn't rush either as he strode across the dock, urging his cloak to flutter around him, despite the lack of breeze. He drew his sword, the white sigil on the black blade turning blood red.

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- You have used conjuration ability [Blade of Doom] to conjure [Ruin, the Blade of Tribulation].
 - Weapon [Hegemon's Will] has prevented the conjuration, gaining all properties of the conjured weapon.
 - [Hegemon's Will] has gained the unholy, curse, disease and poison types.
 - Attacks made with [Hegemon's Will] now refresh any wounding effects on the target. Wounding effects refreshed by [Hegemon's Will] require more healing than normal to negate.
 - Attacks made with [Hegemon's Will] now inflict [Vulnerable], [Ruin of the Blood], [Ruin of the Flesh] and [Ruin of the Spirit].
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"Are you sure you couldn't find a way to be more dramatic, Mr Asano?"

"Not really the time, Shade."

"Perhaps a smoke bomb?"

"You see the people coming to attack me, right?"

"A background choir, chanting your name in slow, ominous tones?"

"You're hardly in a place to criticise anyone for—"

Jason didn't finish his sentence as he and the enemy reached each other. Jason's slow stride became rapid, darting movements as his cloak drifted around him, obscuring his form. He moved straight into the enemies' midst, surprising them as his blade flickered at the end of a shadow arm that moved in ways a flesh and bone arm could not. With more length and flexibility than his actual arms, the shadowy limb and the weapon it held were more like a sword-whip. They moved with speed and unpredictability but inflicted only shallow cuts.

Jason kicked one essence user into the water as he danced through the enemy, their clustered formation making it hard to pin down his elusive movements, but they quickly adapted. Some backed off, giving room to the others and themselves the chance to cast cleansing spells. They were well aware of who they were fighting and what he could do.

Jason didn't try too hard to evade their attempts to enclose him and he was soon encircled. He outstripped the enemies, especially the pure converted, but they swiftly recovered from the surprise of his tactics. What made them a surprise was their unsoundness, proven as he began struggling with their numbers in short order. A bolt of light punched through his cloak to leave a blackened scorch on his armour, while a converted's flame-wreathed sword bit into the flesh of his arm.

Just as it seemed they were dealing with an extremely ill-advised ambush, one of the order members who had backed off felt something through the aura Jason had used to blanket the dock. Five portals opening near-simultaneously was hard to miss, even while distracted by a surprise attack and a domineering aura.

She cried out to the others but it was too late. A figure launched from the top of the nearby crates, propelled forward by magic. Jason used his shadowy cloak to vanish as Humphrey landed in his spot sending out a shockwave that staggered his enemies. It only took them a moment to recover, but Humphrey used that same moment to swing his enormous sword.

Unstoppable Force was the most powerful single attack in Humphrey's arsenal. It was also one that no one looked down on just for being a common ability from a common essence. Not only did it inflict massive amounts of damage but a good part of that damage was resonating-force and disruptive-force, making it effective against any form of defensive barrier. It also kept going, affecting anyone that could be hit with a single swing.

Thanks to the people crowding Jason, who had vanished to make room for Humphrey, there were a half-dozen enemies within reach of his massive dragon sword. He swung it in a full circle, as much a club as a sword. Every impact triggered the silver-rank effect of the attack: a blast of concussive force that exploded out of the enemies' backs to slam into the others behind them, blasting them all away.

Two were sent flying off the dock and into the water. The pure converted went charging at Humphrey while the essence users called for them to stop, but it was too late. Humphrey's very common power made it easy to recognise, so the essence users knew that its bronze-rank effect was to reduce the cooldown for each enemy hit. Landing it on a half dozen meant that as soon as the converted were back in reach, Humphrey swung again.

Even Humphrey's most powerful attack, empowered further by his own life force and a boosting spell from Neil, was not enough to take down silver-rankers. Humphrey's low-rank days of one-shotting everything in his path were well behind him. His impact at silver-rank, though, was possibly even greater because anyone of that level was used to feeling a certain level of invincibility.

The massive life force within a silver-ranker made them extremely hard to kill, so the immense amount of damage Humphrey inflicted in moments was as much a mental shock as a physical one. This was much more true of the essence users than the converted, who weren't entirely drone-like but whose numbed mindsets lacked the imagination to be truly startled. Fortunately, they were the lesser threat.

Humphrey had gone off like a bomb, putting the enemy on the back foot or just their back as additional adventurers came tearing out from behind the crates where the portals had been opened. As the Order of Redeemed Light had done to the dock guards just minutes earlier, their sentries were overwhelmed by numbers.

Baseph gave up on reaching the docks to activate his beacon and signal his wife. He might know the complex far better than the invaders but their sheer numbers made the attempt too much of a risk. He counted multiple teams of essence users, as well as other people who were something else entirely. They were ostensibly people but their auras felt empty, as if they'd been hollowed out.

Baseph's aura was quite strong, being in the upper reaches of silver-rank. He would still need several years to catch his wife's gold-rank using monster cores as, even with their privileged station, the avalanche of cores required was not easy to come by.

His aura control was also solid, not just as required from a member of high society but also because of his wife. She was a stealth specialist with extensive aura senses and had trouble fully relaxing around sloppy auras. She had made sure that his control would rival most adventurers.

The result was that between his aura expertise and the sense-suppressing walls, Baseph remained uncaught, despite a few close calls. Once he realised that attempting to reach the dock was futile, he moved on to the next point of his agenda. Before he did, he stopped in a hidden spot to steel himself. It was a drastic step for many reasons.

Baseph had never killed anyone. He was an administrator who had spent his life running supply networks and high-value mining facilities. But if he initiated the complex's final defence systems, people were going to die. Hopefully, the invaders, but the odds were high that not all the surviving workers had made it to the safe rooms. Even so, he

saw little alternative. With no signal getting out, it would be many hours – if not days, during a monster surge – before anyone realised something was wrong at the facility. That was more than enough time for the invaders to find their way into the safe rooms.

Baseph balled his hands into fists and then relaxed them over and over, his eyes clenched shut. Finally, he opened his eyes and set out.

The leader of the mining complex rescue expedition was Korinne Pescos. Jason had worked with her team once before, although their relationship was not a good one. Jason, along with Vesper and Zara Rimaros, had been attached to an expedition with Korinne's team at a time when Jason hadn't been in a good place. His penchant for going off alone, his savagery and his dangerous, enigmatic behaviour had not enamoured him to her or her team.

As for Jason, the presence of Korinne and her team reminded Jason of Princess Vesper and Jeni Kavaloa, the gold-ranker who had led that expedition. Kavaloa hadn't been any happier with Jason than Korinne, but they had come to at least a mutual respect and Jason had quite liked her. She had been dumped with a scheming princess and a volatile head-case in Jason when all she wanted to do was her job.

Vesper and Jeni had died together, defending Rimaros from the Builder's flying city. Sacrificing themselves to buy time for the weapon that brought the city down to detonate, they were lauded as heroes.

Jason's feelings about the concept of heroic sacrifice were laced with confusion and guilt. He had sacrificed his own life more than once, sometimes knowing he would come back and other times not. He wondered for very much not the first time what made him deserving of such grace, over people who died for others in the full knowledge that they wouldn't come back. He always came up with the same answer, nothing, which left him unsettled.

Jason considered these feelings as he watched Korinne issue directions. It was yet another thing he would have to work through with Arabelle, he reflected, although he was increasingly ill-at-ease with occupying so much of her time. There was more than enough trauma going around and the church of the Healer kept her extremely busy.

"Why does she get to be in charge?" Neil whispered, still listening to Korinne. They were far from the only group talking quietly amongst themselves as Korinne issued directives, reiterating the assignments of the various teams. Silver-rankers were more than capable of multi-tasking their attention, so they didn't miss anything.

"No one would even know about this without us, let alone respond to it."

“You need the hammer to push in the nail,” Humphrey said. “That doesn’t mean you let the hammer decide where the nail goes.”

“What does that mean?” Neil asked.

“It means that in an expedition,” Humphrey said, “everyone has their role. You need to trust the leader, especially a hastily assembled expedition, and all these people know about us is what they know about Jason. Are they going to trust him over one of their own that they have known and respected for years?”

Neil looked over at Jason, who looked back and shrugged. He knew that their impression was probably worse than what Neil was imagining.

“Fair enough,” Neil acknowledged, turning his full attention back to Korinne.

“...and Team Scouring Wind will maintain control of the dock,” she continued. “As communication powers will not work deeper in the facility, we will be using scouting and stealth specialists as messengers and lookouts to keep in contact. This includes familiars from various teams to which you’ve already been introduced. We just overran the enemy here and I don’t want the same happening to any of our teams.”

“I’d love a look in those vessels the Order of Redeeming Light use,” Clive said, eyeing off the vehicles.

“So would every artificer in this room,” Humphrey said. “Priorities.”

“I’ll see if I can steal you one,” Belinda said.

“No, you won’t,” Humphrey told her firmly.

“Oh, yeah, absolutely not,” she said unconvincingly, nodding at Clive behind Humphrey’s back.

The teams only lingered in the dock for the few minutes it took to assess their environment and send out the first scouts, including Sophie. Korinne took the time to quickly reiterate Liara’s briefing before the scouts came back and the teams set out. Jason’s team had Jason’s map ability to navigate, along with Jason’s powerful senses and plenty of scouting options in Jason, Sophie and Shade. Accordingly, they were assigned to the locations deepest within the complex.

Shade had been scouting the facility since Jason released most of his bodies before the expedition even arrived and they were already reporting back to various teams regarding enemy locations and disposition of the facility personnel. This helped Jason’s team detour into the path of a group of pure converted, whom they made short work of. The team paused for a moment to look over the people they had killed.

"I think these poor bastards may be more victims of Purity and his maniac followers than anyone," Belinda said, then looked warily at Sophie, as Jason and Humphrey did the same.

"I'm fine," she said. Jason's aura senses let him know she was lying, as did Humphrey and Belinda's intimate knowledge of her, as lover and friend respectively.

Anger crossed Humphrey's face and Jason mirrored his feelings. Their anger hadn't been at Purity, in that moment, but at Callum Morse. Cal had arrived at the marshalling yard as the teams assembled and were about to depart when he dropped a bomb on the team. Of all the times to tell them that Sophie's mother was leading the Order of Redeeming Light, when they were about to fight them under orders to take no prisoners was about as bad a choice as he could have made. Sophie had put on a stoic face, showing no reaction at all, but she couldn't hide her turmoil from Jason, Belinda and Humphrey.

While they looked with concern to Sophie, Neil and Clive were fixated on the pure converted, transformed by the purified clockwork cores.

"Builder, Purity," Clive muttered bitterly. "They keep doing these things to people. When do we go back to fighting monsters?"

"We *are* fighting monsters," Neil told him. "And we're going to kill them all."

Chapter 558

Just Some Administrator

Unsurprisingly, the Purity worshippers had no shortage of powers that could cleanse Jason's afflictions. Those afflictions were unusually tenacious and inflicted harm as they were removed, but it was not an insurmountable task. This was especially true given that the Order of Redeeming Light seemed to have an excellent grasp of his capabilities. Jason considered this information to have most likely come from the Builder when he made a deal to have them assassinate him.

These factors made sneaking around to drop afflictions on worshippers in hit-and-run strikes a losing proposition. When this swiftly became evident, Jason focused on dropping afflictions on them in hit-and-run strikes anyway. It primed them for elusive and evasive attacks, positioning themselves to watch every shadow. This took them out of position for reacting to a more conventional attack, which is exactly what they faced when Humphrey came barrelling out of a tunnel, his companions close behind.

Unexpected attacks from entire teams were a rarity beyond the low-ranks. Unless a team was specialised in stealth and Ambush tactics, the way Liara's had been, the ability to sense enemies at significant distances meant that sneak attacks usually came from individuals. The sense suppressing stone that surrounded them changed that dynamic, allowing for groups to bumble into one another. Jason's senses ameliorated that for his team, however, giving them just enough advanced warning to utilise ambush tactics.

Switching from warding off Jason's elusive attacks to resisting Humphrey's onslaught required a completely different approach. Humphrey's aggressive physicality didn't allow them the chance to reorganise, smashing into the enemy and disrupting their formation. The team employed a strategy they had used commonly since iron-rank. Putting a heavy focus on Humphrey, they loaded him with powerful buffs, protections and prioritised shields and healing to both maximise his threat and shield him from enemy retaliation.

The rest of the team mixed up disrupting the enemy to keep them on the back foot, like Sophie, or pouring on the damage, like Clive. The team had the advantage of Jason's senses and Shade's scouting giving them the chance to ambush, so Clive's powerful staff and rod were already ritual-enhanced and he came in blasting.

Unlike in the open docks, the tunnels had no room for Humphrey's massive dragon sword and he instead used his other conjured weapon. The Razor Wing Sword was also heavily stylised as a wing, but this was more like the wing of a rainbow-coloured bird. The

back edge of the one-handed blade was a sawtooth of glossy metal feathers, each one a different, vibrant shade.

The feathers were not just for show, flinging themselves off the sword to dance around Humphrey in a storm of rainbow razors. They joined the crystals, already floating around him, that restored his mana and intercepted magical projectiles. As the feather could intercept physical projectiles, it was an effective defence against ranged attacks, although that was less of an issue in the restricted space of the tunnels.

The Razor Wing sword was smaller and lighter than its dragon wing counterpart. This made it more useful in the enclosed tunnels and allowed Humphrey to fight with greater finesse. With the heftier sword, a large part of Humphrey's fighting style was managing the weapon's weight, leveraging it to maximise his formidable strength. It took a deceptive amount of skill, despite the results seeming crude and brutish. With the smaller sword he still used his strength and resilience to great effect, but also got to show off a lifetime of training in a much more recognisable fashion.

As a general rule, the higher an adventurer went in rank, the more they valued open space for combat. Mobility became greater, powers increasingly covered wider areas and even the base physicality of a silver or gold-ranker would swiftly demolish most environments. Aside from those who thrived in dark, constricted environments like assassination specialists or Jason, most adventurers were uncomfortable when they couldn't move freely. That might mean being outside or smashing through barriers, but the naturally magical stone the tunnels were dug from made no such allowances.

This was where the versatility of Jason's team was able to shine. On the Builder island, they had been working with Team Work Saw, who had regularly proven more effective with their efficient, orthodox tactics and strategy. In the tight tunnels, the situation would have been reversed if they had been here to see, but they had not been chosen for the hastily issued contract. Liara had known full well what kind of teams would be most useful.

Every team member present made an impact, from Neil's shields to Clive's staff blasts to Stash as a tentacled ceiling monster. Sophie danced through the chaos, as free as if she were dancing at a festival, Humphrey's razor feathers and Clive's attacks passing her by as if choreographed. Jason, now forgotten as a threat, was free to dose up the essence users while Humphrey and Clive focused on the converted.

Stash's monster form was a flat, fleshy blob that clung to the ceiling like slime. It was dominated by a circular maw ringed with multiple rows of shark teeth, and from inside the

mouth extended three tentacles. The tentacles yanked converted into the maw to be chewed on and then spat back out before moving onto another victim.

The fight was a comfortable win for Team Biscuit, wrapping up as Jason's execute spell dissolved the last Purity worshipper into rainbow smoke. As the team used either Jason or Neil's looting powers to harvest the bodies, Jason looked up at Stash, still adhered to the ceiling.

"I can't tell if that form is awesome or disgusting," he told the familiar, who responded with a stench that almost rivalled the noxiousness of rainbow smoke.

"Okay, now I can tell," Jason said in a choked voice as he held his nose.

"Let's not tarry," Humphrey said, holding the crystal projection map in front of him. Jason could allow others to look at his map but it would be much the same as the projection to the others. Only Jason himself gained a more intimate understanding of the layout from his ability.

"We still have a long way to go," Humphrey added, "and then back again with anyone we can rescue. We won't be able to hand off anyone we find too deep in the complex."

They had already discovered one safe room full of people, along with a group of pure converted attempting to break-in. They had cleared the enemy and the civilians had opened the door from the inside. The team passed them off to another team, one specifically tasked with escorting evacuees.

That team had been guided by Vidal Ladiv, whom Jason and the others had been surprised to see attached to the expedition. The adventurer-bureaucrat didn't have a map power but had visited the facility numerous times in his years working with the civic authorities of Rimaros. This made him the only member of the expedition with personal experience of navigating the complex. As he had recently reached silver-rank, he just scraped-in the qualification to participate.

"I still can't get my head around this map," Neil said, peering at the three-dimensional projection Humphrey had out. "It looks like a tangled ball of strings and rocks."

"We're here," Clive said, pointing somewhere in the middle, then at the bottom. "And we're heading here."

"I'm a little worried about any people we find deep down," Sophie said. "It'll be hard to protect people all the way up if we get in a fight in these tunnels."

"That's why we have plan B," Jason said.

"I don't like plan B."

"That's why it's not plan A," Jason told her.

“My concern is what Lord Amouz warned us about,” Neil said. “If that happens mid-rescue, it’ll be a huge mess.”

“He said it most likely wouldn’t,” Humphrey said.

“Yeah, and nothing ever goes wrong for us,” Neil shot back. “The moment he said that, I knew it was going to happen. Tempting your own fate is one thing, but that guy tempting ours. That shouldn’t count.”

“Humphrey’s right,” Clive said. “It would take one of the senior staff to not only avoid the safe rooms but also be convinced that no rescue is incoming and then successfully navigate to multiple locations within a facility swarming with enemies, all without being caught. If anyone even made the attempt, they’d be dead. What kind of administrator both would and could manage that, even a silver rank one?”

Princess Liara’s aura had the strength and expert control to hide her emotions from Jason, but he’d been watching her body language as Cassin Amouz had explained the potential for defensive sabotage by the facility staff. Her reaction had been extremely subtle but he noticed it. Jason was aware that Liara’s marriage was a political one, but he had a hard time imagining her marrying anyone ordinary, even if he was a miner. If she still showed this level of concern after decades of marriage, he wasn’t just some administrator.

“What Humphrey’s right about,” he said, “is that we need to get moving.”

The infrastructure nodes placed throughout the complex were all large chambers filled with complex artifice. Some were overtly magical, like the wall panel with a dozen holes from which various coloured crystals jutted. Others looked more like industrial machinery; steel monstrosities radiating heat and steam that left the room sweltering.

In one such room, Baseph Rimaros was standing in front of a large metal box. Aside from a flat, narrow section, the top of the box was angled at forty-five degrees, with ridges to hold a mosaic of square, ceramic panels in place. The sequence of the tiles governed the systems controlled through the node room, each tile bearing a complex sigil that glowed with green luminescence. The colour reflected the status of the various systems, all of which were operating within ideal ranges. Normally Baseph would have been happy that his facility was operating optimally, but now he would be sabotaging it himself.

He took a crystal recording projector from his satchel-style dimensional bag and set it on the flat, narrow section of the box. A projection flickered to life over the projector after he took out a recording crystal and slotted it in. The projection depicted a sequence of tiles similar to the one on the panel in front of him, and as the projection played, the tiles started to shift. First pausing the projection, Baseph began rearranging the tiles.

As he continued arranging the tiles, Baseph repeatedly referenced the projection, playing it forward and winding it back through various displayed sequences. As he did, the sigils on the tiles started changing colour, one by one. Slowly, as he moved through one sequence after another, the luminescence on the tiles shifted through orange and into red. After a lengthy set of tiles sequences, the last tiles finally turned red, only for every tile to suddenly go dim at once.

“Great,” Baseph muttered to himself. “What idiot insisted on installing additional safety cut-outs?”

He pulled a pry-bar from his satchel and moved around to the side of the box.

“Oh, that’s right, Baseph; it was you. Good job.”

He worked to jam the sharp edge of the pry-bar between two panels on the side of the box.

“Let’s hope it does add so much time that everyone dies because it takes too long to sabotage your own damn mine.”

The panel came off and he shoved the bar back into his bag, pulling out a hammer and chisel instead, along with a glow stone. He crouched down to peer inside the box and pushed in the glow stone, which floated in the air to illuminate the interior. Inside the box was a series of vertical rods, engraved with runes. He knew the rods would normally be glowing but a ceramic panel at the back was the only thing lit up, the sigil on it glowing a harsh red.

Getting down on all fours, Baseph took the hammer and chisel and shuffled as far as he could into the box, the hole being too narrow for his shoulders. The ceramic panel was hard to reach, having been designed as such deliberately to prevent exactly the kind of tampering Baseph was attempting.

“That’s it,” he muttered. “From now on, I’m slacking off on the job.”

The scout for Melody’s team came back from where she had been ranging ahead.

“I found another safe room,” she reported.

Melody pulled out a crystal projector and slotted in a crystal. Gibson Amouz had maps of every major complex in his family’s holdings, but only one map of each. The Order of Redeeming Light’s stronghold lacked the facilities to replicate projection crystals and the risk in time wasted and potential exposure had prompted Melody to reject the idea of getting them replicated in one of the Sea of Storms’ cities.

As there was only one map, Melody had personally taken charge of the team using it. While the other teams went largely after the bulk-stored goods in the upper reaches of the

complex, closer to the dock, certain key materials were kept in more secure vaults. Accessing those vaults required either an expert who could crack them, which Melody didn't have, or finding the people who could open them. These were all upper-level officials.

As people from the dock had managed to escape and alert the facility, the key staff would be in safe rooms by now, most likely in the administrative sections in the middle of the complex. The safe rooms were also difficult to access, but not so much as the vaults themselves. It would take longer than Melody wanted, but it was time she could afford since they had managed to prevent the guards from signalling for help. Even if an expected transport arrived late, there would be plenty of time before a real investigation as to what was happening took place.

Melody checked their location on the map, looking for the safe room the scout had found.

"We're a little way out from the main administrative centre," she said, "but there's still a chance someone we can use is in there. Let's check it."

Chapter 559

Family Issues

Clive tossed a pinch of powdered lesser monster core against the wall, briefly causing runes to light up as the powder fell on them.

“I was right,” he said. “There are hidden enchantments placed at regular intervals along all these tunnels.”

“What do they do?” Humphrey asked.

“More precisely, what do they do to us?” Neil asked.

“Nothing, at the moment,” Clive said. “These enchantments are completely inactive, which is why our magic senses didn’t notice them. I think they’re part of the safety measures for the facility.”

“Meaning that if this place does get sabotaged,” Neil said, “whatever these enchantments are they become active.”

“Most likely,” Clive said. “Should I try to figure out what they do?”

“That would be prudent,” Humphrey said, “but we lack the time for prudence. We keep going.”

Baseph whacked his hammer into the metal plate set into the wall. He repeated the action over and over until the glowing sigil engraved into it dimmed. This caused the orange sigils glowing at various points around the room to turn red. Then despite having been carved out of solid, magical rock, the room started to very gently vibrate.

“Two nodes down,” he muttered, but his expression held more concern than satisfaction. He had no illusions of the vibration going unnoticed. If the invaders had any idea of what they were doing, and he had to imagine they did, then they would probably be actively searching for him now.

Melody paused, frowning as she tilted her head.

“Melody?” Sendira asked as the rest of the group paused as well.

Melody didn’t have any of the pure converted with them, keeping a lean, sharp team of five, including herself. Her second-in-command, Sendira, was the person she trusted the most, which was as much about clarity of purpose as loyalty. Sendira was not the most imaginative subordinate, but she could be relied on to execute orders faithfully, with a surplus of dedication and a deficit of ambition. Every member of the Order of Redeeming Light was loyal to Purity, but not necessarily to Melody.

The third member of the team, Kelleigh, was the most skilled of all Melody's forces, with the possible exception of Melody herself. Even that difference was potentially due to her being in the low range of silver, where Melody was closing in on gold. Like Sendira, Kelleigh was not ambitious, but she demonstrated the occasional independent streak. This placed the ever-reliable Sendira as Melody's second, even if she wasn't quite up to Kelleigh and Melody's level.

The last members of the group definitely weren't up to Kelleigh's level. Rhett and Jaime were a pair that Melody kept close because they demonstrated similar independence of thought to Kelleigh, but to a much greater degree.

Melody was fully aware that the flames of redemption that all members of the order went through frequently engendered a lack of imagination. It wasn't close to the drone-like behaviour of the pure converted who had resisted the conversion process, but there was a distinct trend towards linear thinking, as exemplified by Sendira. While Melody valued loyalty, she also understood that the ability to think laterally was often more valuable than a strong sword arm.

This was the reason she kept Rhett and Jaime close. They were, without question, the most independent thinkers within all the order's forces. At that moment, they were thinking about how much they didn't like being under many tons of rock that were, in turn, under many tons of water. Unfortunately, their suggestion about how voluntary participation would be was not something Melody had been receptive to.

Melody dropped to one knee, placing a hand on the smooth, polished granite of the tunnel floor.

"This is deep granite," she said. "This entire complex has been dug right through it."

Sendira also crouched to touch the floor and the others did the same. The silver-rank sensitivity of their touch picked up the incredibly faint vibrations.

"What is that?" Sendira asked.

"Deep granite has a resonating property," Kelleigh said. "It is sometimes used in the construction of resonating-force siege weapons for exactly that reason."

"Who uses siege weapons when there are essence users?" Sendira asked.

"Not everywhere is Rimaros," Rhett said. "Most places, silver-rankers are the elites and gold-rankers are too special to waste on knocking down walls."

"We had a line of wine jars made from deep granite," Jaime recollected. "Expensive stuff, but perfect for certain kinds of wine."

"Oh, do you remember tremblevine wine?" Rhett asked reverentially.

"I really thought it would sell better," Jaime said. "It was so good."

"I still think it was the name. It sounds kind of gimmicky and cheap."

"Yeah, we lost a packet on that deal. Do you think we could get some of that wine here?"

"Not here, here," Rhett told him. "We're in a wet tomb, remember?"

Melody cleared her throat and the two looked around guiltily.

"What do you think these vibrations are?" Sendira asked Melody while glaring at Rhett and Jaime.

"I'm not sure," Melody said. "It seems to be affecting a wide area."

"The vibrations could well be resonating through the stone across large portions of the complex, if not the entire facility," Kelleigh said. "It might be possible for me to track them to the source."

"Is that necessary?" Sendira asked. "Perhaps we would be better served by staying on task and avoiding further delays."

"No," Melody said. "Whatever this is, the lordling Amouz kept it from us, likely hoping it would catch us out and get us killed."

"While getting tortured," Jaime said. "You have to respect that."

"No you don't," Sendira said with a glower. "We should have put him through the flames of redemption and made him one of us. Then he would hide nothing from us."

"He'd share everything, sure," Rhett said. "Weeks from now, once he recovered from the flames. Maybe even months. How long did you take to wake back up, Sendira?"

"Almost three months," she acknowledged.

"We don't have that time to wait," Melody said. "We need to be already building up a construct army by the time the next war starts. The Adventure Society either knows what we are doing or soon will. Once the monster surge is no longer occupying the bulk of their resources, they will seek us out with rigour."

"Unfortunately, that left us with less than effective methods of questioning," Kelleigh said.

"I'm just going to come out and say it," Jaime said. "I don't think torture's great. We worship Purity, not Pain. I know that Caitlyn and her group think that pain purifies the soul, but I think they just like hurting people."

"And being hurt, I think," Rhett added. "I've heard some sounds coming out of their dormitory that I'm not sure how I fell about."

"Sometimes suffering is necessary," Kelleigh said. "Both to be endured and inflicted. There is no Purity in enjoying it either way, yet Caitlyn does both."

“It is not for you to question other cell leaders,” Melody said as she stood up. “It seems that our captive has endured out under Caitlyn’s ministrations better than we thought. Kelleigh, track these vibrations to the source. I want to know what we’re dealing with.”

“What did I tell you?” Neil asked as Team Biscuit all held their hands to the floor.

“Any way to trace the source?” Humphrey asked Clive. “The staff probably don’t realise that rescue is here.”

“I think I have a ritual in a book that can trace vibrations to the origin point,” Clive said.

“That’s not what we need,” Sophie said. “We have to find whoever it is before they finish the job and all this gets a lot harder.”

“Forget harder,” Neil said. “We’ll be the ones who need rescuing.”

“What have you got, Shade?” Jason asked.

“I am not in regular communication with my other bodies,” Shade said, “but they have been searching for any facility personnel, including senior staff. If one of my selves finds the saboteur, they will inform him that evacuation is in progress. As for tracking the saboteur, perhaps if Mr Standish can determine what has been done already, he can anticipate what will be done next.”

“I think you may be overestimating my ability to determine what’s going on from maybe one room of damaged artifice infrastructure,” Clive said. The rest of the team shook their heads.

“No, I don’t think we are,” Neil said.

“We have a plan, then,” Humphrey said. “The ritual please, Clive.”

Clive called up a circle of floating runes and the small aperture to his storage space appeared. After a quick rummage, he pulled out a book.

“Lindy, can you...” he trailed off as he glanced at her and remembered, then started flicking through his book.

“What?” Belinda asked.

Sophie tapped a finger to her top lip and Belinda’s eyes went wide. Her moustache shrank into her face and vanished.

Baseph turned the heavy wheel valve until it wouldn’t turn anymore. He kept exerting his silver-rank strength anyway, but instead of turning more, the wheel broke loose from the shaft as a secondary seal locked heavily into place. With a growl, he tossed the wheel

aside and pulled a sledgehammer from his bag. The heavy head was made not of metal but magical stone, while the handle was made of the difficult to cultivate colos wood. Very few materials were able to endure rough treatment at the hands of a high-ranker. The materials of the simple hammer made it more valuable than most expertly-crafted bronze-rank weapons.

Baseph hammered on the pipe over and over, its resilience to even silver-rank strength remarkably formidable. Baseph urged himself on, knowing the gong-like ringing would draw any nearby raiders straight to him.

Panting with exertion, Baseph staggered out of the infrastructure node room. He was moving to slink into a shadow when it stepped away from the wall and took the shape of a person. He turned to run, only to find the figure appearing in front of him again.

“Baseph Rimaros, spouse of Princess Liara Rimaros, I presume. My name is Shade. In case it in any way entices you to be less inclined to flee, I am an acquaintance of your wife.”

Baseph looked warily at the dark figure.

“I don’t recall my wife being friends with any strange shadow men.”

“With respect, Mr Rimaros, I am not responsible for the level of attentiveness you demonstrate in the performance of your husbandly duties.”

“Excuse me?”

“I am not here to assist you with your family issues, Mr Rimaros, but to prevent you from sabotaging this facility. As we speak, a rescue operation is taking place to eliminate the invaders and rescue the workers of this facility. If you complete your sabotage efforts, this operation will be considerably impeded.”

Baseph turned to look back at the doorway he had just emerged from, then back to Shade.

“Oh,” he said, and the tunnel started to tremble.

Jason and Sophie were both away from the team, separately scouting ahead, when they heard water rushing on them like an indoor tsunami. Even so, their silver-rank reflexes gave them each time to spring into action. Sophie reacted with unsurprisingly alacrity, moving faster than the wall of water as she dashed down the tunnel. Jason pulled out one of the items he’d purchased to help him deal with underwater environments; a garish orange belt he was still hastily attempting to buckle around himself when the water hit.

Sophie managed to dash back to the team, who had likewise heard the water and were making what preparations they could. Humphrey jammed his sword into the stone floor, burying half the blade despite the stone's resilience. He then gripped the hilt tightly and braced himself. Neil gripped Humphrey tightly and also braced himself. Sophie crashed into Clive, not slowing down as she slung him over her shoulder and kept moving. Belinda looked between her team members, then at the approaching water as it slammed into her.

After what felt like endless, wild tumbling, Jason slammed into something that yielded enough to not hurt while somehow still being very firm. He found himself face-down in knee-deep water and pushed himself onto all fours. He pushed a hand against the barrier and looked at it blearily. It was a glowing magical wall, on the other side of which was water deeper than he was tall.

He groaned as he pushed himself onto his knees and looked around. He was in a tunnel, the other end likewise sealed by a magic barrier. He was also not alone. A woman with dark skin, familiar features and starkly white hair was somehow as dry and pristine as he was wet and bedraggled. She looked down at him from where she was standing on the surface of the water. He got to his feet, using his cloak to reduce his weight and step onto the surface of the water as well.

"I don't suppose..." he began, stopping as she drew her sword, cold hostility in her eyes.

"I suppose not," he said, drawing his own blade. He had lost the extra belt he had tried to put on before the water caught him, but his normal belt had held just fine. The pair looked at each other for a long moment before they clashed, dashing across the water to meet blades. Jason immediately recognised that she was using his fighting style, the Way of the Reaper. He also recognised that she was better at it.

The Way of the Reaper was a highly versatile style, with Jason and Sophie both using it in very different ways. Sophie used its adaptiveness in domineering fashion, shifting her approach moment to moment to apply relentless oppression. Jason was more deceptive and elusive, unpredictable enough that he seemed almost ephemeral. Jason's opponent fell somewhere in the middle, adaptive and aggressive but also tricky to pin down. After a rapid exchange of blows, they separated, each watching the other with caution.

"You fight a lot like I do," she observed.

“Your daughter said the same thing the first time we met,” Jason told her. “I’ve got to find a better way to meet women.”

Chapter 560

A Power That You've Overlooked

Jason and Melody faced one another in the magically sealed section of tunnel, both standing lightly on the water.

"You know, then," she said.

"There's a guy who's pretty keen to catch you up."

"You're helping someone catch your friend's mother?"

"Nah, we told him to stick it up his quoit. We'll try and bring you in for our own reasons. Alive, even though we were told to gank you."

"That's your general way of doing things, from what I understand."

"Pretty much. I don't suppose you can let me know what the Builder told you about me?"

"The Builder's attitude to you has been extremely erratic, from what I've seen. Sometimes it came across as a burning obsession to see you dead, while at others a ruse."

"A ruse?"

"We had semi-regular contact with the Builder's cult. I know for certain that the Builder was at least partially using his seeming obsession as a mask when his real intentions were for the diamond-ranker you're connected to. He wanted her to waste her single chance to intervene, which is why the Sea of Storms had three of the Builder's fortress cities. But I've also seen indications that his obsession was very real, as if the Builder himself was of two minds on you."

"Yeah, he's always been a bit all over the shop," Jason said. "I'm not sure I ever got a straight answer on why, exactly. A friend – and she'd know – told me that great astral beings have their behaviour affected by the vessels they're using. It's not just a straight-up puppet show. I don't think going from mortal to the omnipotent sky wizard of building model kits left him as the most stable of blokes, either, but I can't help but think there's something I'm missing."

"Do you have any concept of how arrogant you sound?" Melody asked. "Why would a great astral being be comprehensible to... wait, did you say he used to be mortal?"

"Yep. The guy who had his job first got caught playing silly buggers with a couple of worlds – guess which ones – and they gave him the boot."

"That seems like an absurd story."

"Lady, you've had me checked out. I am an absurd story."

“Indeed you are. Your capability with the Way of the Reaper is impressive for someone who only learned it a few years ago. Skill books?”

“Yeah.”

“Even so, you’ve certainly made it your own.”

“I’ve had the odd scrap here and there,” Jason said. “Plenty of chances to practise. No match for an old hand like you, but your daughter might give you a run for your money. You’ve got the experience but she’s crazy talented. Rufus Remore quietly told me she’s one of the best he’s ever seen. And that means something, if you know the name.”

“I do. And I would like to thank you for what you’ve done for my daughter.”

“Your welcome, I suppose. I’m not sure that means much coming from a deadbeat mother, though.”

Melody’s superior expression turned angry.

“You have no idea what I’ve sacrificed for that girl!”

“I know what I’ve sacrificed,” Jason said, unfazed by Melody’s outburst.

“She’d have died a child if not for me.”

“Oh, you stopped your child from dying. Congratulations on the absolute minimum of parental responsibility.”

Melody flashed across the water, sword darting at Jason. There was another dancing clash of blades before they again separated, this time Jason coming out the better. He knew that she was either genuinely angry or very good at selling a story. Her aura told him the emotions were real, but he understood better than most how aura manipulation could fake emotions.

“I got my soul personally tortured by the Builder, which kicked off more than a little bit of a feud,” he taunted. “The very fact that you know this is because he hired a god to take me out, which is where you came in. You’re not going to tell me you topped that, which makes me a better mother than you ever were.”

“I’m going to fulfil the Builder’s request in this tunnel,” she snarled.

“Is that so?”

“I know your powers, Asano.”

“They’re pretty awesome, right?”

“And you’ve compared our skills.”

“Your technique is also awesome, although getting angry makes you sloppy. Unless you’re faking it. I’ve had this problem with women before.”

“I also know you like to put your enemies off with babble. That won’t work on me. Nothing you have will work on me.”

“It’s called banter, lady. If you’re going to do it, at least learn the nomenclature. And I also use it to mask my nervousness in tense situations. This definitely counts, given how many times you’ve tried to stab me already. So I’m going to keep the banter coming if it’s all the same to you.”

“I know everything you can do, Asano. You can’t escape and you can’t beat me. There’s nowhere to hide and I can cleanse your afflictions as fast as you can put them on if you can’t hit me with that blade. Needing attacks to initialise your affliction suite is just one of the weaknesses I can exploit. I know them all.”

“There are a lot of them,” Jason acknowledged. “If I ever see one of those anime-haired celestines wearing a sailor uniform, fighting a tentacle monster, I’m going to do something I regret.”

As Melody’s brow creased with the slightest indication of confusion, Jason initiated the attack for the first time. As Melody had predicted, his blade failed to find purchase on her before they once more broke away and went back to slowly eyeing one another off, swords held in front of them.

“I was trained in the Way of the Reaper before you were born,” she told him.

“And you’re still silver rank? Rough couple of decades?”

“Yes,” she admitted, and when his eyebrows lifted in surprise, she struck. Jason had been using a combination of body language and aura to feint an opening and finally managed to score a glancing hit.

-
- Special Attack [Leech Bite] has inflicted [Bleeding], [Leech Toxin] and [Tainted Meridians] on [Order of the Reaper Infiltrator (sealed)].
 - Weapon [Hegemon’s Will] has inflicted [Hegemon’s Tribute], [Vulnerable], [Corrosion], [Ruin of the Blood], [Ruin of the Flesh] and [Ruin of the Spirit] on [Order of the Reaper Infiltrator (sealed)].
 - Due to item set [Regalia of the Dark Hegemon], Weapon [Hegemon’s Will] has inflicted [Hegemon’s Tribute] on [Order of the Reaper Infiltrator (sealed)].
 - Weapon [Hegemon’s Will] has bestowed an instance of [Benevolent Hegemon] on you.
 -
 - Item [Amulet of the Dark Guardian] has bestowed eight instances of [Guardian’s Blessing] on you.
 - Due to item set [Regalia of the Dark Hegemon], item [Amulet of the Dark Guardian] has bestowed eight instances of [Hegemon’s Authority] on you.
-

Jason ignored the system message but a glimpse of something in it distracted him, which was all Melody needed to score a clean hit, raking her blade across his chest. The

blade skittered across a barrier before it broke and dug into flesh, shielding him from a portion of the damage.

-
- All instances of [Guardian's Blessing] have been consumed to absorb damage.
 - Each instance of [Guardian's Blessing] has bestowed [Blessing's Bounty].

 - You have been inflicted with [Creeping Death].
 - You have resisted [Creeping Death].
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant] from ability [Sin Eater].
 - You have gained an instance of [Integrity] from ability [Sin Eater].

 - You have been inflicted with [Purifying Flame].
 - You have resisted [Purifying Flame].
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant] from ability [Sin Eater].
 - You have gained an instance of [Integrity] from ability [Sin Eater].

 - Resisting [Purifying Flame] has inflicted you with [Inexorable Purgation].
 - [Inexorable Purgation] cannot be resisted.

 - [Inexorable Purgation] has been moved to [Hegemon's Dominion]. If you return [Hegemon's Will] to the scabbard, the next attack made with it will inflict [Inexorable Purgation].

 - [Purifying Flame] (affliction, wounding, fire, holy, dispel): Inflict ongoing fire damage and periodically negate a boon of the magic, elemental or unholy types.

 - [Inexorable Purgation] (affliction, holy, stacking): [Purifying Flame] is more difficult to resist. This affliction cannot be resisted. This affliction is negated when the victim is afflicted with [Purifying Flame]. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

Melody didn't let up the advantage, following up with a rapid sequence of jabbing thrusts. On the third strike, he pushed his body into her lunge, sliding himself onto her blade to arrest its movement. Silver flame erupted inside his body but he showed no reaction as he gripped her sword arm and pulled her face to face.

She found herself staring into alien eyes, within the void-like darkness of his hood, as he chanted a spell in a voice of arctic stone.

"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."

The strength of Jason's Punition spell was based on the number of afflictions the enemy had, and only a handful were on Melody. Jason had learned his lesson about waiting for the perfect moment with Purity worshippers, though, taking the damage where he could get it. The necrotic damage wasn't a lot, but every attack she had landed or even that he'd blocked had affected her with the Sin affliction, amplifying necrosis.

She kicked him off her blade, her high-end silver strength noticeably superior to his, and they both staggered back. Her skin was flecked with black pockmarks of necrosis while his chest wounds were burning with ethereal silver flames. In both cases, normal recovery was impeded, hers by the hard-to-heal necrotic damage and his by the fire burning the wounds. They both had answers, however, and they choose not to immediately re-engage as they paused to recover.

Jason simply waited for his regeneration effects to heal him, the flame sputtering out as the affliction was absorbed by his scabbard. The rate at which it absorbed afflictions was accelerated by suppressing the aura of the afflictions originator, and Jason's aura pushed hard on Melody's. He didn't entirely suppress it because reading her emotions was one of the edges helping him against her superior speed, strength and skill.

As for Melody, she slapped her upper arm and a rune stitched into her sleeve glowed briefly before vanishing. The church of Purity excelled in the creation of dispelling and cleansing items, and the consumable rune immediately purged Jason's afflictions. Jason's affliction powers were not to be ignored, however, and the cleansing came at a price. His Punition spell, in addition to afflicting damage, had left behind an unwelcome gift in the form of the Penitence affliction.

-
- [Rune of Greater Purgation (silver)] had triggered a strong cleansing on [Order of the Reaper Infiltrator (sealed)].
 - All afflictions on [Order of the Reaper Infiltrator (sealed)] have been cleansed.
 - Cleansing your afflictions has triggered [Penitence].
 - [Order of the Reaper Infiltrator (sealed)] has been afflicted with an instance of [Penance] for each cleansed affliction.

 - [Penitence] (affliction, holy): Inflicts an instance of [Penance] for each curse, disease, poison or unholy effect that is cleansed from an enemy with this affliction.

 - [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.
-

The damage from Penance was limited by the number of afflictions, making it far from debilitating to a silver-ranker, but the transcendent damage was unavoidable, chiselling away at her health. She took a healing potion from her belt, drained the vial and tossed it aside. Jason didn't push the attack.

"You're not weak, I'll give you that," she told him. "You aren't going to win, though, and you know it. The environment matters a lot to your combat style and this place advantages me. I'm faster, stronger and better. You wouldn't believe how many healing

and cleaning items I have, so I can let you hurt me here and there. You can only beat me if your afflictions reach a threshold where they escalate past the point of recovery being possible.”

“You really are like your daughter,” Jason said. “Not just the looks, either. You probably don’t know what the genetic lottery is, but you ladies are big winners. It’s your personalities that make you alike, though.”

“How so?” Melody asked, surprising Jason with curiosity and an undercurrent of longing in her aura.

“You seem to know *a lot* about me,” Jason told her. “Your daughter had a thing for me too.”

Melody glowered at him but this time she didn’t make an angry lunge at him. She looked at where she had wounded him, the flesh already knitted back together and the robes repaired over them.

“I was curious to talk with you,” she said. “You’re important to my daughter, and I was wondering what grabbed the Builder’s attention.”

“And?”

“Not impressed.”

“I need to start using food to make a first impression with women. This getting kicked in the face approach isn’t working out. Can I offer you a chocolate cake sandwich?”

“I’ve seen enough,” she said. “With your healing, I’m going to have to be more thorough in taking you down. No more chats.”

“But that’s the best part. Besides, you haven’t even seen how I’m going to beat you yet.”

“You don’t have anything that can beat me.”

“I didn’t when your three minions ambushed me as I was going about my business, but you’ll find it’s different now. I have something new to rely on.”

“You mean that sword? It’s pretty, but it’ll take more than that.”

Jason laughed.

“No, it’s a power that you’ve overlooked, even though it’s the same power that beat the Builder.”

She tilted her head in a gesture of curiosity.

“Do tell, Mr Asano.”

“It’s Jason, please. You’re my friend’s mum. Anyway, the reason you overlooked this power is that magic is too easy in this world. Magic is so rich here you can literally find it just laying around as essences and awakening stones. In my world, magic is a struggle.

You have to work and scrape for it, but in doing so, you find pathways to power that people from this world would never consider.”

“Such as?”

“Here, magic is so rich you can just pick it up off the ground. But in my world...”

He paused just as the wall between them exploded inward, dust billowing and chunks of stone splashing into the water that started draining out through the hole.

“...friendship is magic,” Jason finished as the sound died down.

Melody raised her sword warily as she and Jason stared at one another through the stone dust, but Jason didn't move. Instead, Sophie came through the hole in a blur, immediately lashing out at Melody. Taken aback by the sudden confrontation with her daughter, Melody backed off, showing far less aptitude than she had against Jason. Jason's aura came crashing down on her as the rest of the team came pouring through the hole. With Melody's aura suppressed, outnumbered and caught on the back foot, the suddenly one-sided fight quickly came to an end as Jason tapped her with his sword and Humphrey and Neil gripped her arms.

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- You have cleansed all holy afflictions from [Order of the Reaper Infiltrator (sealed)].
 - Weapon [Hegemon's Will] has inflicted multiple instances of [Hegemon's Mercy] on [Order of the Reaper Infiltrator (sealed)].
 - [Hegemon's Mercy] (affliction, holy, stacking): The victim of this effect is subjected to a powerful suppressive force affecting all magical abilities. This affects essence abilities, innate abilities and item abilities. Abilities derived from external transcendent sources are affected more strongly. This affliction drops off rapidly when not within the area of the wielder of [Hegemon's Will]'s aura. Additional instances have increased effect.

The handful of Penance instances left on Melody translated to only a mild suppressing effect. It was still enough that, when combined with a fully suppressed aura, Clive was able to snap a suppression collar around her neck. She thrashed in wild struggle, but both Neil and Humphrey were stronger, holding her in place as Clive locked the collar.

Melody slumped, but her face locked on her daughter's. Sophie looked at her mother impassively, then slipped a bag over her head. Neil started shoving their prisoner towards the hole in the wall that water was draining out of. Humphrey gathered up Sophie in a hug while Clive and Jason looked on awkwardly.

“Being able to sense you working on the other side of the wall was amazing,” Jason said to Clive. “I don't think I've ever found my aura senses so useful.”

“I don’t think it was strictly necessary,” Clive said. “One of Shade’s bodies led us to you.”

“No, I mean with timing the line you guys entered with. My banter game was on point.”

Jason's eyes went wide, then he groaned unhappily.

“What’s wrong?” Clive asked and Jason gave him a forlorn look.

“I just realised she doesn’t know what *My Little Pony* is,” he said. “She totally didn’t get the reference.”

Sophie looked at him from over Humphrey’s bicep.

“Why would you expect that?” she asked. “No one ever does.”