

## Chapter 542

### Portal Logistics

Suffering the full effects of the aura beacon for only a few moments had left Humphrey spiritually exhausted, but by the time he finished talking with Jason, he was ready to get back into action. While Humphrey knew his silver-rank recovery attribute was part of his rapid restoration, he suspected that Jason's spirit realm was also somehow contributing.

Translating the power and potential that every soul contained was the entire purpose of absorbing essences and advancing through the ranks. In Jason's spirit realm, however, there was no need for translation; Jason had the power on tap. Humphrey guessed that Jason utilised some of that power to help him, but he didn't ask if that was the case. Given that they were inside Jason's soul, the intimacy and trust of that act left Humphrey unsure if he'd be disappointed to just be imagining it.

As soon as Humphrey and Jason stepped out of the spirit realm, Jason spread his aura out to its fullest extent. He sensed the expedition's gold-rankers doing the same, searching for the captured adventurers. They were also looking for the Purity loyalists who they suspected to be going for the clockwork kings, meaning they were likely underground already.

Jason had a variety of voice chat options and he opened a private channel for himself and the gold-rankers, Jana and Liara. They had the strongest aura senses by far and could coordinate their searches.

"I'm sensing something underground," Liara said. "It's muffled but that makes sense. If the clockwork kings weren't shielded from aura detection somehow, they would have been found in earlier sweeps of the island."

"I'm not picking up any auras I recognise from the expedition members," Jason said, "but I've touched on what I think might be a suppressed aura. It would make sense that they're using suppression collars."

"You can sense suppressed auras?" Jana asked.

"Dealing with aura suppression is kind of my thing," Jason said. "I'm only sensing one suppressed aura, though. It's possible that they split up the prisoners."

"That makes sense," Liara said. "The battle became very spread out and a handful of Purity worshippers managed to escape with captives. It makes sense that they scattered."

“As I said, I’m only picking up on one aura,” Jason told her. “The others are too far for my senses to pick up or dead. They may have already escaped the island. That one suppressed aura is moving in the direction of the shore.”

“It looks like those vehicles they arrived in left while the beacon was active,” Liara said. “The scout teams watching the island managed to capture one of them but the rest slipped away. They’re almost impossible to detect while under the water. They will likely return just long enough to extract their people.”

Switching from the private channel to the team leader channel, Liara directed Jason’s group to intercept the potential captive he had sensed. She would take a group and look for a path into the underground while Jana was in charge of searching for the remaining captives.

“Jason,” Humphrey said. “Those people you sensed. They’re heading for the shore?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “Probably going to meet one of their magic submarines.”

“Let’s see if we can’t get ahead of them, then.”

“No worries.”

While portals were considered the most useful of all utility powers, the logistics of their use had always posed issues for adventurers. Along with range, portals had two critical limitations, the first of which was the need to have been to a portal destination. The other issue was the number and power of people who could use them. Jason was able to portal five silver-rankers and Clive four, while Humphrey could teleport up to three people in addition to himself. Fortunately, familiars didn’t add to that burden.

Jason knew that his spiritual realm wasn’t a workaround, as the people hidden away in his soul still consumed the portal’s energy. With his full team in there, his portal would fail as soon as he tried to step through it.

Humphrey and Clive had developed routines to work around these limitations, incorporating Jason after they were reunited. Until they further ranked up their powers they had to be creative with their portal logistics. Fortunately, their team had the unusual advantage of multiple abilities, allowing them to go through a process that was a little complicated but got the job done.

It started with Clive entering Jason’s spirit realm. Belinda went with him, although only Clive was essential. Humphrey and Jason then flew into the air; Humphrey with draconic wings and Jason on wings of night. From the air, they had a better perspective on the island than even the tallest building offered. Their silver-rank visual acuity was excellent but not telescopic, so Humphrey pulled out a non-magical telescope.

This was a trick that Humphrey had picked up from Jason for extending the line-of-sight range of short-range teleportation, which had no cooldown. Humphrey picked out a spot in the direction Jason pointed and teleported himself and Jason there. With Clive and Belinda in Jason realm, that was Humphrey's full capacity.

Clive and Belinda emerged at their destination, which was the top of a building overlooking the walls around the edge of the city. Clive and Jason both opened portals to the place they had just left the group, allowing the rest to come through with capacity for one person to spare.

Much of the city wall had collapsed, giving access to the water via piles of rubble making rough ramps. Humphrey had chosen the spot because a relatively convenient water access point was nearby, making it a likely rendezvous point for the enemy with their transport.

Jason had already withdrawn his aura before being teleported. With his broad search, there was no question that their quarry had sensed his attentions but there was no need to advertise the fact that they had moved into the path of the enemy. It wouldn't be hard to sense their group, but they didn't want to alert the Purity worshippers too early. The others all retracted their auras as well, but they were not stealth specialists and would only remain hidden outside a certain range.

"I'm going to go scout them out," Jason said. By reducing the range of his own senses he would be able to track the enemy without being noticed himself unless they had their own aura-strength anomaly like Jason.

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The two silver-rank members of the Order of Redeeming Light, Rhett and Jaime, were frogmarching their collared, gagged and hooded prisoner through the sloped and broken streets. Moving with the prisoner had slowed them down and when the beacon coverage dropped they hadn't yet escaped the island.

"I'm telling you, Sendira is using us as decoys," Jaime said. "We got screwed going along with this."

"You think I don't know?" Rhett asked.

"She was lying to our faces."

"Doesn't matter. We're in it, now. All we can do is ride it out to the end."

"At least take the hood off the prisoner. We'll move faster if he's not stumbling along the whole time."

"She said to keep the hood on."

“Because she wants us to get caught. The idea is that when something goes wrong because she didn’t think it through, it all comes down on our heads. The transport might not even be waiting for us.”

“That’s unfortunate,” a voice said from behind them and they both whirled around. A man was standing only a few metres from them, having gotten closer than should have been possible. He wore blood-red combat robes and a cloak so dark it seemed less like fabric than a void wrapped around him. Inside the deep hood was a pair of strange eyes eerily watching them.

They couldn’t sense any aura from the man. Their eyes told them he was real but their other senses said he was not, leading to an unnerving dissonance. They couldn’t even smell him, which their silver-rank olfactory senses certainly should have. There were several potential reasons for the disconnect. One was a stealth specialist while another was a projected illusion. Then there was the worst-case scenario.

“I’m not a gold-ranker,” Jason assured them. “My name is Jason Asano.”

The two Purity worshippers stirred.

“You’re the one the Builder wants dead,” Jaime said. “We were told you were on the island.”

“We were told to kill you if we got the chance,” Rhett added.

“Here you are, then,” Jason. “It’s your lucky day.”

Jaime and Rhett shared a look, both of their expressions flashing uncertainty.

“Why does the Builder want to kill you?”

“He tried to take my soul one time, so I took this astral space of his. Well, someone else took it first and I stopped him from taking it back. It’s all a bit complicated. That’s even before the magic door I stole, which is a whole other thing. Are you blokes familiar with multiverse theory?”

Jason pushed the hood back off his head, revealing his face.

“Look,” he told them. “We could fight. I’m pretty sure that would go badly for you, but you have a hostage, so who knows? But you seem like good, clean-living blokes. Maybe we could make a deal.”

“What kind of deal?” Rhett asked.

Jaime turned to glare at him.

“What?” Rhett asked. “We should at least hear him out.”

“Definitely not,” Jaime said.

“Why not?”

“We’re part of the church of Purity.”

“And whose fault is that?” Rhett asked. “Hey, Rhett, let's give up the amphora business and join the church of religious crackpottery.”

“That is not how I described it.”

“Well, you should have.”

“I know that now. But we're in it, and this guy is definitely not pure.”

“Well, I don't care. Do you want to fight him? I'm willing to bet he has a half-dozen friends stashed nearby, too.”

“Then why would he make a deal?”

“Maybe he finds us intimidating.”

“Yeah, I bet spooky blood-robe guy finds us terrifying.”

“Well, maybe if someone let me wear my pointy hat.”

“That hat is not intimidating.”

“It is so. And it's magical.”

“It stores beverages!”

“Well, he didn't know that!” Rhett said, gesturing at Jason. That was when they realised that Jason was no longer there.

“Where did he go?”

They looked around and realised that not only had Jason vanished while they were arguing, but so had their prisoner.

“How did he do that?”

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“The tricky part was some very delicate aura suppression to see if I could gradually remove the prisoner from their perception without them noticing while they were distracted,” Jason said.

The prisoner, de-hooded and ungagged, was being treated by Neil.

“And you just let them go?” Sophie asked Jason.

“I bet you left something behind, though, didn't you?” Belinda asked.

Jason flashed a grin.

“There's a pretty good chance someone will spot the Shade bodies in their shadows, but they don't have any gold-rankers. We might be able to learn something useful before that point.”

“You aren't worried about your familiar being caught?” asked Carlos, the leader of the other adventuring team.

“One of the most valuable aspects of my excess bodies is that they are quite expendable,” Shade said, emerging from Jason’s shadow. “The ability to send them into dangerous places is quite valuable.”

“I made the mistake of not using Shade to scout the dangerous places in the past,” Jason explained. “When Shade and I had only just started working together, me and the team found ourselves standing over what we later discovered was a massive hidden base for the Purity church and the Builder cult. I let myself be talked out of scouting it out and didn’t understand the extent of Shade’s remarkable abilities yet. I don’t want to make that mistake again.”

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In the depths under the city, Sendira, Fila and Ramona were in the massive forge room. In front of them was a pair of subdued clockwork kings, the device Sendira brought to control them having worked precisely as intended.

“What now?” Ramona asked. “The aura shielding on this chamber is probably damaged and not fully hiding us. Even if it is, the gold-rankers will sense us the moment we leave it. They have to be looking, now the beacon is down.”

“Yes,” Sendira agreed. “The likelihood of their having realised our objective is high.”

“Even if Ramona digs us a path out that the adventurers can’t follow,” Fila said, “our chances of escaping this island with gold-rankers coming after us are as good as nil. What great plan does Melody have for getting us out of here? Or didn’t she think things through this far?”

“As a matter of fact,” Sendira said, “she did.”

Sendira led them to the chamber doors and outside the aura shielding the room provided. The clockwork kings lumbered behind them. In the hallway outside, Sendira took out a small magical object; a silver pyramid small enough to rest in her hand. She set it on the ground and twisted the top of the pyramid to remove it. Inside was a crystal that started glowing silver-blue when Sendira touched a finger to it.

As Sendira replaced the cap over the crystal, a powerful false aura was projected from the pyramid. The aura beacon was nothing like the one that had blanketed the island, being far less powerful and not disrupting other auras.

“Great,” Ramona said. “Your plan is to make it easier for the gold-ranker to find us.”

“No,” Fila said, looking at the device. “I know what that is.”

“What is it?” Ramona asked.

“It’s a portal beacon,” Fila said. “All portal abilities have different secondary effects. Some can target portals in places they’ve never been, so long as there is an aura-based target marker to home in on.”

“The only portal user we have in our branch of the order can’t do that,” Ramona pointed out. “We also don’t have a gold-ranker strong enough to portal these clockwork kings.”

A portal flared into being and Sendira ordered the clockwork kings to move through it. “Fortunately,” Sendira said, “Melody is not as short-sighted as you.”