

Chapter 564

Enough to Kill You With Power to Spare

What was called a safe room was actually several rooms, set out like a dormitory. There was a communal room into which the entrance opened, with metal tables and chairs in uniform rows, all affixed to the floor. It reminded Jason of a prison, or at least what prisons looked like in movies and television.

As only the administrative centres on the upper levels employed normal-rankers, the safe rooms in the deeper levels were designed for essence users only. This simplified the logistics as the food storage could be a cupboard full of spirit coins. There was no need for toilet facilities and the only infrastructure that needed to be incorporated was a shower room and systems to cycle air. The back of the communal room led into the sleeping cells where bunks were packed in, a half-dozen to a room.

The team had hurried inside at Jason's urging. Sophie marched their manacled and hooded prisoner to one of the tables and shoved her into a seat as the others looked around. There were around twenty people either standing around or emerging from the bunk rooms to check out the newcomers. Most were celestines, with a scattering of humans and elves. Humphrey had no time for the conditions inside, looking to Jason for an explanation of his sudden urgency.

"Gold-ranker?" he asked.

"Yeah," Jason answered, his voice grim. "It looks like they swung back around."

"Will this room hold against a gold-ranker?" Humphrey asked Baseph.

"For a while," Baseph said. "Maybe only a short while, depending on their specific powers. Nothing short of fortress-town-level defence infrastructure will completely stop a determined gold-ranker. The defences on the door could mess up a silver-ranker, although probably not outright kill them unless they tried to bash the door down with their head and kept trying, regardless of the damage they took."

"No one's that idiotic," Neil said.

Baseph glanced at Karen, who had delayed their entry into the room.

"You should never underestimate what people are capable of," he said, then quickly introduced the three people who had been waiting on the other side of the door. All were celestines.

"The person who finally let us in is my second, Ciara Amouz. She's the deputy director of this facility. That's her assistant, Andres Amouz, and my nephew's wife's cousin, Karen something."

"I'm the associate vice deput—"

"No one cares, Karen," Andres cut her off.

"There's no need to be rude, Andres," Baseph told him.

"You just called her 'Karen something.'"

"No, I said Karen *Sumptin*. That's her name."

Andres gave Baseph a flat look while Ciara shook her head with a wry expression.

Karen opened her mouth but Baseph held up his hand in a gesture to cut her off.

"Let's just leave the adventurers to do their job, shall we?"

Karen opened her mouth again and Baseph held up his hand again, this time his gesture being more forceful.

"By which I mean, Karen, that *we shall* leave the adventurers to do their job."

Baseph shepherded the other civilians away, leaving Jason and the others to plan.

"What about plan B?" Neil asked.

"We've gone too far in for that to be a viable option," Clive said.

Plan B was to use gold-rank coins to try and boost themselves to the point that their portal powers could punch through the suppression of the deep granite into which the facility had been dug.

"That would work for Humphrey and I a third of the way down at most," Clive said.

"Jason could maybe do it as deep as halfway into the complex, but we're way too deep here. The amount of deep granite around us is massive. A gold-ranker couldn't portal out of here unless they were a dedicated portal specialist."

"Leaving us with two options," Humphrey said. "assuming the gold-ranked converted tries to break in here and doesn't pass us by. Which it will not. "Do we go out and fight it, along with however many essence users and other converted are with it? Or do we wait for it to break in here?"

"Forcing it to break through the defences first could help us," Clive said. "It may be a gold-ranker, but it's not an essence user. It should take at least some damage breaking in."

"That will take time, as well," Sophie pointed out. "If Adventure Society reinforcements arrive while the door is stalling them, that takes a fight we don't want off our hands."

"But if they do get in and we have to fight them in here," Neil countered, "that exposes the safe room and the people inside. They might be fine if we fight the thing in this room and they're hunkered down in those sleeping rooms, but is 'might be fine' a risk we want to take?"

“It’s all about the risk we choose,” Clive said. “Going out or letting them come in, they’re both bad options. We already decided not to go after that thing once, and for good reason.”

“I don’t see an alternative unless they pass us by,” Humphrey said.

“It won’t,” Jason said. “I’m pretty sure it sensed us, and it wasn’t alone. It’s not a question of if it attacks, but when.”

“What about her,” Sophie said, nodding her head in the direction of their prisoner. “Is there any way we can use her?”

“Not as a hostage,” Shade said. “There are others within the Order of Redeeming Light who wish to claim the leadership but have been unable to dislodge Melody. They will be extremely open to letting us do it for them.”

“Maybe she knows something we can use,” Clive suggested.

“I’ll bet she does,” Sophie said. “We can’t trust anything that comes out of her mouth, though.”

Humphrey frowned, staring at the hooded woman for a moment before nodding.

“When all our options are bad,” he said, “expanding our range of bad options may be the best we can do.”

The team looked at each other for a moment, then Sophie stepped up and yanked the hood off Melody’s head. She was left blinking at the sudden absence of the magic that had been suppressing her senses as well as gagging her. After a moment she looked at the adventurers arrayed in front of her, her eyes settling on Sophie.

“Hello, daughter. Not the reunion I was hoping for.”

“We didn’t take that thing off your head for family time,” Humphrey told her. “If you’re no use to us, I’ll put it right back on.”

“Collar, too,” Jason said.

Sophie looked at him in surprise but he didn’t take his eyes from Melody. She glanced at Humphrey, who nodded.

“Make a move and we will put you down,” Humphrey warned her as Sophie unlocked her suppression collar. Melody gave him an amused laugh.

“So stern, young master Geller, but we all know you’re too much the good little boy to be truly intimidating. If you want to threaten me, you should have Mr Asano do it. He tries to be a good boy, but we all know what he is deep down.”

“Look, lady,” Jason said, sounding bored. “I love an evil, seductive prisoner even more than the next guy...”

He glanced from Humphrey on one side of him to Neil on the other.

“...well, one out of two.”

“Hey,” Neil said with an affronted expression.

“You’re also my friend’s mum,” Jason continued, “which does *not* make it hotter, whatever Clive might have said.”

“Hey!”

“I’m all for playing silly buggers, by and large, but we don’t have time for that right now,” Jason said, ignoring the looks he got from the rest of his team. “We need to know if you have any information we can use, or back goes the hood and the odds are higher than not that you’ll die before it comes off again.”

Melody looked around the room before looking at her stone-faced daughter and then back to Jason.

“This is one of the safe rooms,” she said.

“Yep,” Jason said.

“And you need something, which means there’s someone out there you think can get in and aren’t confident of being able to handle.”

She turned to Sophie.

“And say what you will about your little friends, daughter, they can handle a lot.”

“We got you chained up with a bag over your head,” Sophie told her.

“Yet you took it off because you need my help.”

“Tell us about the gold-rank converted you brought with you,” Humphrey demanded.

Melody turned to Humphrey with a bored expression.

“I really wish she’d picked the interesting one.”

Sophie moved to put the hood back on.

“Which gold-rank converted?” Melody asked quickly, causing Sophie to pause.

Humphrey looked to Jason, who shrugged.

“I only sensed one,” Jason told him, “but it would make sense if there were more.

They probably knew they’d need to break into these safe rooms.”

“You sensed it in this place?” Melody asked. “Ah, the formidable Asano soul power. You realise that—”

Melody was cut off by Sophie’s fist slamming into the side of her face.

“Enough games,” Sophie said. “You need to give us something.”

“We know your friends will be happy to see you die in captivity,” Humphrey said.

“Your survival is contingent on ours, right now.”

Melody turned to Humphrey, her eyes narrowing.

“How did you react to our raid so quickly?” she asked him.

“You should have picked a place that didn't have Princess Liara's husband in charge,” Jason said, jumping in before Humphrey could respond. “She's a very protective spouse, as it turns out. While your people were running around causing trouble, he was sabotaging the place and setting off a personal distress signal she gave him.”

She turned back to Jason and their eyes locked.

“She's not going to help us,” he said. “Hood her.”

“He's right,” Melody said. “I don't have a way out of this for you.”

“Then you die with us,” Sophie said.

“Oh, you're a plucky bunch; I daresay we'll have the chance to chat again. Plenty of mother-daughter tim—”

She was cut off as Sophie jerked the hood over her head, then snapped on the collar.

“Sorry,” she told the others. “That was a waste of time.”

“At least we found out there are more of the gold-rank converted,” Humphrey said.

“Assuming we can trust her,” Neil said. “Which we absolutely can't.”

“She was telling the truth,” Jason said.

“You're sure?” Humphrey asked.

“As much as I can be,” Jason said. “Her aura control was good, but not good enough to stop me from reading her emotions. Unless she has some way to falsify them that I'm not familiar with, which I wouldn't entirely rule out.”

“Oh, that's why you wanted the collar off,” Neil realised. “You can't read her aura if it's completely suppressed.”

“Not that it was a great help.”

“She wasn't lying, though?” Humphrey asked.

“She only lied once,” Jason said.

“When?” Humphrey asked.

“When she said she wished Sophie had picked the interesting one. I think, in her extremely twisted way, she genuinely does want to reunite with her daughter.”

“By putting me through a bizarre enslavement ritual,” Sophie said angrily.

“Yep,” Jason said. “She also knows that I was lying about how we got here so fast.”

“How?” Humphrey asked.

“Because we knew that her people would turn on her,” Jason said. “She knows we have a spy in her camp, now.”

“I'm sorry,” Humphrey said. “That was my mistake.”

"It's fine, Jason said. "You haven't seen as many police procedural interrogations as I have. We definitely can't trade her back to her people to make them leave us alone, though. Now, that would compromise Belinda."

"Where does this leave us?" Clive asked. "We don't have any more options than we had before. All we learned is that there are even more of the gold-rank converted out there."

"Well, I do have one plan," Jason said and the rest of the team turned to look at him.

"Is it a good plan?" Neil asked.

"About the usual."

"Then no," Humphrey said.

"You're not even going to listen to it?" Jason asked.

"Jason, any time you survive one of your plans, it's a surprise," Clive said.

"It's not that bad."

"Stalling the elemental tyrant in the waterfall village," Neil said. "That almost killed you."

"But it didn't."

"Surprisingly."

"Going against Lucian Lamprey and Cole Silva to help Belinda and me," Sophie said. "That almost got your soul handed over to the Builder and we're still dealing with the ramifications of you and Builder hating one another."

"You actually did die jumping off that tower," Humphrey said.

"And Farrah said you died twice more while you were gone," Clive added.

"You're just cherry-picking now. If..."

Jason turned to look at the heavy metal door.

"They're out there," he said, the joviality gone from his voice.

"So, what was that plan exactly?" Neil asked Jason.

"It's basically the same as plan B," Jason said. "Call it plan B plus."

"There's no way to portal out of here," Clive said.

Cloud stuff flowed out of the amulet around Jason's neck and took the shape of an archway.

"Jason, what are you doing?" Clive asked, his voice filled with unhappy suspicion.

"Clive and I have been working on a special project," Jason said.

"A special project that doesn't work," Clive corrected.

"We have the basics down," Jason said. "The problem is that it needs to use a cloud construct as a medium and we can't figure out how to make that part work. The cloud flask is too complex for us to figure out how to reconfigure it."

"Can't you just dump the right stuff in and make it work?" Neil asked. "That's how you normally add features, right?"

"We've done that as best we can," Clive said, "but it's only part of what we need. The problem is that we need to tap into core functions of how a cloud construct channels the energy by which it operates."

"And you think you can solve that problem in the time it takes the evil zealots to break down that door?" Neil asked.

"No," Jason said, "but there's only one actual problem. To which there is, potentially, a makeshift solution."

"Oh, no you don't," Clive said angrily. "You'll kill yourself twice over."

"I still have no idea what either of you are talking about," Neil said.

"We've been working on a way to boost Jason's portal ability," Clive said. "More range, more people. The idea is to use his cloud constructs as a medium to handle the extra power that would take, therefore preventing Jason from exploding in the attempt."

"The problem we have," Jason said, "is that it takes more power than I have to even try activating. Way, way more. As in, I could eat a gold spirit coin and we're still falling short."

"That's why we need to modify the cloud flask," Clive said. "So that cloud constructs make that specific power exchange more efficient. They have the capacity; we just need to define the right pathways. It's theoretically easy since the cloud constructs are designed to be task-versatile. We even know more or less what we're looking to do and only need to make it more efficient. We just don't understand the construction of a cloud flask enough to do that. If we can, the efficiency will improve to the point that a gold-rank spirit coin, maybe even something less drastic, would be enough to boost Jason's portals."

"How does any of this help us right now?" Humphrey asked.

"If I'm following this right," Neil said, "Jason can use his portable chunk of cloud construct to make this portal boost work, but he doesn't have anywhere near the power. I think what Jason is talking about is using a diamond-rank coin to make up the difference."

"ABSOLUTELY NOT!" Humphrey roared. "I know your soul is strong, Jason, but that much power would kill you."

"Yes, it would," Clive agreed.

“I’m not talking about a diamond-rank coin,” Jason said. “I have something else. Something I can take only as much power from as I need.”

“Which will still be enough to kill you with power to spare,” Clive said. “You’ve worked through this right alongside me, Jason. You know how much power it will take. It wouldn’t be much different from using a diamond-rank coin.”

“What is this power source?” Neil asked.

Jason looked over at the civilians watching them with worried expressions.

“I’ll explain later,” he said. “Something people were fighting over on my world that should have been left alone.”

“No,” Humphrey said, no room for compromise in his voice. “Jason, this plan is out. Our chances aren’t what we’d like in this fight, but they aren’t so bad we’ll sacrifice you.”

“There are ways to keep me alive,” Jason said. “Clive and I have explored this.”

“Hypothetically,” Clive said. “And in every calculation we’ve made, your death came out more likely than your survival.”

“Those calculations weren’t wildly accurate.”

“You think that makes it better?”

Clive turned his head, his expression conflicted.

“Jason, you can’t let yourself die for the people in this room, and you know it. You have a larger responsibility.”

Jason narrowed his eyes at Clive.

“How much did Dawn tell you?” he asked.

“Everything,” Clive said. “She knows you, Jason. She knew that sooner or later, we’d be having a conversation like this. She needed someone to remind you that, like it or not, your life is more important than that of a couple of dozen people. If anything, the moral choice would be to use these people as a distraction that lets us escape. Or even just you. You told us what you came back to our world to do, but you left out the part about how important that specifically you are. About what happens to your world if you don’t survive to finish what you came here for.”

“There’s no way the World-Phoenix put all its eggs in my basket,” Jason said. “You know that. Dawn may not say it, but there’s some kind of backup plan in place.”

“You’re probably right,” Clive told him, “but what is the price of the second-best option, Jason?”

Jason’s expression grew dark. For a moment, something flashed in his eyes unlike anything the team had seen from him before, but it passed in a fleeting moment.

“I’m not going to use these people as bait and run.”

“I know,” Clive said. “But staying and fighting has a better chance of your survival than definitely killing yourself to activate a half-finished project that may or may not even work.”

Jason bared his teeth but gave a capitulating nod. The archway of cloud-stuff dispersed into nothingness.

“Good,” Humphrey said. “We fight then. Jason, how many of them are out there beyond the gold-rank converted?”

Jason closed his eyes and extended his senses, inching them forward as he pushed through the suppression.

“I can sense the gold-ranker. I think it’s using some kind of flame power on the door. There are other converted, but only a handful. Five... no, six essence users.”

The rest of the team shared a grim look. While Order of Redeeming Light members generally weren't as good as guild-level adventurers, the leaders were and the rest were far from pushovers. On top of the gold-rank converted, it meant a desperate fight was waiting on the other side of the door.

“Wait,” Jason said. “Someone else is approaching.”

“Please tell me they’re Adventure Society reinforcements,” Neil said.

“No,” Jason said. “It’s another pair of essence users with a gold-rank converted.”

Jason opened his eyes and looked at the others.

“Damn you, Jason,” Humphrey said.

“At this point,” Jason said, “we try my plan or everyone dies.”

“Maybe we can use Sophie’s mother as a hostage,” Neil said. “It might work.”

“No,” Humphrey said. “It won’t.”