

## Chapter 561

### Nostalgia

When the two gold-rankers racing to the underwater mining facility arrived at the submarine dock, they found the surface of the water sealed with a magical barrier, shimmering red with shifting yellow runes. The barrier was only from a bronze-rank ritual so they easily forced their way through. The barrier repaired itself immediately, with the water that came through with them pooling on top of its horizontal surface.

Leaping from the barrier onto the docks, they found it full of people. There were no vehicles present but the dock was lined with anxious civilians. A handful of corpses were piled behind some crates, thick blood trails showing where they had been moved from. The tunnels leading deeper into the complex were all blocked by shimmering magical barriers, behind which the tunnels were flooded with water.

Ritualist adventurers were maintaining the barriers blocking the tunnels, as well as the surface of the water where the gold-rankers had breached their way in. Other adventurers had opened up portals through which civilians were filing through to safety. The facility staff were almost entirely iron or bronze-rank, consuming only a fragment of a silver-rank portal's energy with their passage. For every silver-ranker that could have passed through, ten bronze or a hundred iron-rankers could do so instead.

The gold rankers quickly assessed the room, spotting the group that was in charge. One of the gold-rankers went straight for the team leader, Korinne Pescos, who was calmly issuing directions to bring the dock to order. The other gold-ranker moved to a member of her team, Orin Pensinata.

The approach of the gold-rankers did not go unnoticed. Waves of relief flooded the auras of adventurers and civilians alike, reassured by the presence of the two powerful figures. Korinne recognised the gold-ranker approaching her and hurried to give a report.

"Lord Ferringhaas, sir. We were mid-evacuation when the sabotage we were warned of took place. The extraction teams were chosen for having ritualists and water or air manipulators, or had them attached specifically in case of this circumstance. Accordingly, our teams managed to safeguard civilians that were en route to this extraction point. Operations have continued, but at a slower pace."

"Civilian status?" Ferringhaas asked.

"Live civilians are either sealed in safe rooms, waiting for rescue; en route to this dock; in this dock or extracted to Rimaros via portal. We've confirmed that some have fallen to hostiles, either caught outside safe rooms or in safe rooms that have been

breached. Presumably, any live civilians caught outside of the safe rooms following the sabotage are either trapped or dead, but until the hostiles are cleared, a methodical search is impractical.”

“Disposition of the hostiles?”

“A large portion of them departed with all vehicles in the dock, both their own and a submarine transport full of materials. According to civilian witnesses that had already been rescued, the adventurer team assigned to hold the dock turned traitor, helping them extract and going with them.”

Ferringhaas scowled at the news of traitors.

“They really were...” he muttered.

“Sir?”

“They didn’t kill the civilian witnesses?” Ferringhaas asked, schooling his expression.

“They did not kill any civilians outside of two who made trouble for them, we believe due to time constraints. Once they discovered our rapid response, and especially once the sabotage took place. They seem to have taken the people they had and the materials they had gathered and left, presumably predicting your arrival. We believe a large number of hostiles were abandoned in the base and are still active.”

“Adventurer casualties?”

“Injuries, including several severe ones that proved resistant to healing. No deaths. Many of the enemy have the means to impede healing of the wounds they inflict, primarily through variants of silver fire.”

“This is the same fire they were reported as using when encountered during the Builder island expedition?”

“Yes, sir. We have some people who were on that expedition as well and confirmed it. Our severely injured were priority evacuated. A large portion of the enemy forces are non-essence users and believed to be victims of the modified clockwork cores seen during the Builder island expedition.”

“The ‘pure converted’ we were informed of.”

“Yes sir. They are notably weaker than essence users but the primary source of the silver fire. These pure converted are believed to be the bulk of enemy forces remaining. From what we could determine, the Order of Redeeming Light members mostly assumed lower-risk roles in the operation. This allowed them to be notified and react more quickly to our arrival. That said, we believe that at least several teams with essence users made their way into the deeper areas of the complex for reasons unknown.”

“Enemy casualties?”

“Numerous pure converted; we don’t have a good count, but several dozen at a minimum. Most of the essence users encountered were not anticipating such a rapid response and we caught them on the back foot. Silver-rankers are not so easily killed, though, so many were able to escape deeper into the complex. Including the ones killed that were guarding the dock on our arrival, we have eliminated fourteen silver-rank essence users. We estimate between nine and twenty-five more enemy essence users are still unaccounted for within the complex, along with an unknown number of pure converted.”

“That would be a larger deployment of forces than the Builder island raid,” Ferringhaas assessed.

“Yes, sir. My best guess would be that this operation was considered lower-risk as they did not anticipate the Adventure Society reacting as quickly as we have. This may even be the bulk of their local forces.”

“I’m going to reinstitute the capture order,” Ferringhaas said, “but only as a low-priority if safe to do so. If encountering the enemy having trouble with the post-sabotage conditions, capture is acceptable *only* if safe. Otherwise, the kill-on-sight order remains in effect. More than anything enemy-related, first priority is evacuating civilians. No one is to compromise rescuee safety over pursuing enemies. Make sure that all expedition teams are notified.”

“Yes, sir.”

As Korinne briefed Ferringhaas, the other gold-ranker went to the person he knew from her team to get his own briefing. Orin was organising people going through a portal when he sensed his gold-rank uncle approaching. His uncle inclined his head slightly back and Orin furrowed his brow. The uncle gave a slight nod and then wandered over to where Korinne was going over specifics of estimated ally and enemy locations on a projected map.

Another of Korinne’s team members, Rosa, nudged the much-larger Orin with her shoulder.

“You two are as talkative as ever, I see.”

Orin nodded.

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“Given how deep we are in the facility,” Humphrey said, “I think trying to make our own way out is a mistake.”

“Agreed,” Clive said. “Using ritual magic to dig through walls and take down barriers, all while managing the water that’s been caught up in various sections isn’t practical. Not

all the way back to the dock. We might all have equipment for fighting underwater, but conducting rituals underwater is something else.”

The team had retrieved Jason’s bright orange, magical swimming belt, which was now secured around his waist.

“Do we even have the ritual materials to get back up?” Neil asked.

“No,” Clive said. “It’s an outside chance that we could stretch what we have, if everything went right, but...”

He gestured at the tunnel in which they were standing up to their knees in water, buried deep under the seafloor.

“...I don’t think it’s an everything-goes-right kind of day.”

“There’s a safe room not far from where we are,” Jason said, checking his map ability. “We can join the people there and wait to get rescued with everyone else.”

Jason allowed the others to see his map and plotted out a route using waypoints.

“That looks viable, so long as the flooding in the intervening chambers isn’t too bad,” Clive said.

Following the deliberate flooding of the facility, all the rooms had been magically isolated. The magical barriers were safety measures put in place to isolate flooding and had automatically triggered, sealing chambers and segmenting tunnels. Only the comprehensive disabling of safety systems allowed the water to spread throughout the complex before the barriers went active.

With no appropriate essence abilities to deal with the water, the team was reliant on Clive to either disable barriers or dig through walls. Other chambers and tunnel segments could easily be deeply flooded, which is one of the reasons they preferred negating barriers. They could see through barriers to gauge how much water was in the next chamber, and disabling them was much easier than digging through magic stone. It usually required metres of tunnelling to reach the next tunnel or chamber, which they were opening relatively blind. Jason’s senses could reach through one or two walls but were significantly dulled in doing so.

They travelled with Sophie keeping a tight grip and a tight watch on their prisoner. Melody was not just collared and manacled but also hooded. It was no ordinary hood, but one that could seal the enhanced perception and magical senses of a silver-ranker. At least, silver-rankers that weren’t outliers like Jason.

“Where did you get that hood?” Neil asked Sophie.

“From Belinda.”

“Why did she have it? It’s not like we knew we were coming to grab someone ahead of time.”

“I don’t know,” Sophie said. “You’ll have to ask her yourself.”

Neil looked at Belinda, who was merrily nibbling on a gingerbread man as she waded through the icy seawater.

“It’s probably best I don’t know, now that I think about it.”

They made their way through tunnels along Jason’s mapped route. Some sealed sections were all but empty of water, lowering the level in the tunnels they travelled through as they were opened. Others had enough water to raise the level, although that was not the most unpleasant thing the tunnels could contain.

The team found themselves looking through an intact barrier wall into a section of tunnel entirely flooded with water. Floating within was a trio of corpses, their lingering auras marking them as iron-rankers.

“Probably came this deep into the complex to hide from the Purity worshippers,” Neil said, watching the floating bodies with a sombre expression, tinged with anger.

“Do we take them out of there?” Humphrey asked. “It doesn’t seem right to leave them.”

“I’m not sure it’s any better to take them,” Clive said. “We don’t have any caskets.”

Clive, Jason and Humphrey shared a look between them. Before they were team, their first contract together was to retrieve the body of a fallen adventurer. They had been supplied with a special casket to contain the body before it was placed in storage, but it was only a symbolic gesture.

When putting a body in a storage space, there was no practical difference between respectfully placing it in a casket first and just throwing it in like a spare sword. The casket accomplished nothing and there was no contamination within storage spaces unless strange and extremely unusual magic was involved. They all knew that the bodies were empty shells, the soul not being an unproven concept to any of them. Even so, none of them wanted to treat the victims with anything but respect. These people weren't fighters but had been doing their part to produce essential supplies that helped save people during the monster surge. They might not be adventurers but they were comrades.

“They’ll be taken care of when this place is recovered,” Jason said.

“That won’t be until after the monster surge, at least,” Humphrey said. “It might be a strategic resource but not important enough to undo everything done here. Those people will be down here for weeks, at least. We still don’t know how long this extended monster surge will last.”

“Don’t underestimate what some logistics specialists with water and earth essences can do,” Neil said.

“Neil’s right,” Clive said. “Remember that the Amouz family specialise in dealing with places like this. Not every elite essence user is an adventurer specialised in killing.”

Jason thought back to his early days in Greenstone where he’s watched essence users building a public toilet. He’d stood and watched for hours, the friendly construction workers surprised and happy that someone found what they were doing interesting as they answered his many questions. He frowned, uncertain if it was good or bad that corpses buried somewhere an oil derrick would have trouble reaching triggered his nostalgia.

“Let’s leave them to their rest,” he said, pulling up his map. “It looks like the best way to go is actually to drop down through the floor and follow a parallel tunnel, then back up on the other side.”

“Not a bad way to detour,” Clive said. “If the chamber below is full of water, it won’t spill in, and if the one we dig up into is, it can drain down.”

The tunnel below turned out to be a good pick. The chamber they dropped into had only waist-deep water, even after their original tunnel section drained into it. The next two sections of tunnel were almost empty, so dropping the barriers lowered the water level to barely mid-shin. Clive needed to set the next ritual on the ceiling so they could go back up, but as a silver-ranker, he could levitate so long as his concentration wasn’t interrupted.

While Clive was working, Jason felt something tingle at the edge of his perception, muffled as it was by the magical deep granite.

“Shade,” he said, and the familiar emerged as Jason moved to the side of the tunnel and pushed his senses against the dulling force of the deep granite. He closed his eyes, placed his hands against the wall and braced himself as if trying to push it over. Extending his senses through the suppressive force of the stone was like trying to push custard through a mattress.

“What is it?” Humphrey asked.

“One of Shade’s bodies,” he said, strain in his voice. “I’m trying to let him know we’re here. There’s someone with him, too.”

“Princess Liara’s husband,” Shade said. “I can almost contact my other self and memories are trickling through.”

Jason leaned back from the wall, tension dropping out of his shoulders.

“If we dig up, make our way along the tunnel to the intersection and then go right instead of left towards the safe room, we’ll find them,” he said. “It shouldn’t be much of a detour.”

## Chapter 562

### Saving the Day With the Power of Quips

That the two gold-rankers sent to the underwater facility had been available was a stroke of good fortune. Claud Ferringhaas was an expert manipulator of water and stone, with his earth, water, shovel and verdant essences. He was an agricultural expert and only part-time adventurer, although his combat abilities were in no way lacking.

Amos Pensinata was pure adventurer, with the might, vast, deep and leviathan essences. He had spent the bulk of the monster surge handling the ocean monsters that were often the most dangerous in the sea of storms. Although he lacked the water essence his powers made him extremely comfortable in the depths.

More important than his specific powers was Amos' aura strength. Like Jason, his aura was oppressively powerful compared to others of his rank, and he stood a full rank over Jason. Also, like Jason, his aura strength did not come from being a fourfold with overlapping aura powers. Jason was not the only one to endure tribulations of the soul.

Where Jason could extend his senses through a room, maybe two, Amos was able to push his perception to encompass a third of the facility. He was also strong enough to breach the water-sealing barriers segmenting the tunnels through raw physical might.

After being updated on the status of the facility by Korinne Pescos, a plan was quickly devised to most efficiently find and evacuate the trapped facility workers. Supported by the silver-rank adventurers, the gold-rankers set out.

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Baseph Rimaros was in a dry chamber, having triggered the seal walls in a section of tunnel early to protect himself from the flooding and to await rescue. Until that point, he had been in a state of relentless tension. While sneaking around the complex, he had passed within arm's reach of capture more than once. The ramifications of failure had scraped his nerves like a knife.

Now that the sabotage had been carried out and he was relatively safe, awaiting rescue, the tension had left him and he sat, back to the wall, with his knees up and his arms clutched around them. He was numb in the aftermath, left with nothing to do but dwell on the ramifications of his success.

How many colleagues had died as a result of his actions? How many friends? Because of his sinister companion, Baseph now knew that a rescue operation had already been underway, perhaps even before he started. His desperate actions had not just been

a danger but a needless one. He had wanted to save people, but how many had drowned while being escorted to what would have been safety if not for him?

“It was all pointless,” he muttered, almost trance-like.

“You acted in a manner appropriate to the information you had available. That is all that can be asked of anyone,” Shade said. “I know a man who has done this and gotten it wrong, but he does not let that stop him from doing it again. In times of crisis, inaction is often worse than the wrong action.”

“Do you think people died because of what I did?” he asked softly.

“Yes,” Shade said.

“Innocent people, I mean?”

“Yes; the non-innocent have most likely survived. The best information we have is that the Order of Redeeming Light's essence users are silver-rank and well-trained, with their leadership at the very least being of guild standard. Many have likely been inconvenienced or trapped entirely but not killed.”

Baseph's head drooped.

“It is possible,” Shade continued, “that the order's forces made up of people implanted with purified clockwork cores are more susceptible to drowning but I do not have the information to confirm or deny this.”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” Baseph said. “Clockwork what?”

“I shall spare you the lengthy explanation but there is a device that can turn regular essence users into what we believe are obedient slaves to the Order of Redeeming Light. The best information we have suggests that this implantation can be done involuntarily, which would mean that these Purity converted are actually victims. This, arguably, could mean that they are innocent of the very actions they are carrying out.”

“I didn't think mind control was possible, even with magic.”

“It is not. It is, more accurately, a very comprehensive form of body control that includes the physiological mechanisms that comprise the ability to think. Thus, the body is controlled by a hostile force but there may be memories or personality traits that linger, depending on the nature of the transformation. Lesser vampirism and other hostile transformative abilities operate in this manner. The soul remains intact, but is no longer in control of the body.”

Baseph looked up at the shadowy figure, curious despite himself as the explanation continued.

“Essence users make the most, and sometimes only, viable subjects of such transformations. Their bodies have already been altered to draw power from the soul to



fuel their abilities, a power such transformations rely upon. They cannot forcibly violate the soul, even with a complete transformation, but if the body is already able to harmlessly tap into the soul's effectively infinite power, it can continue to do so, even if the body is modified to use that power in different ways.”

“The soul stays intact?”

“Yes, but the body generally cannot be recovered once the transformation is complete, even if the soul is unsullied. In most cases, only death can release the trapped soul from a fully transformed state. I have seen this many times.”

“Was your soul trapped? Is that how you ended up a shadow person.”

“I have ever been a shadow, since my inception. I have no soul, strictly speaking, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that my true state is something akin to a soul. I was bound once, and made custodian of many souls that were trapped in hideous, transformed and – worst of all – immortal bodies. I then became the familiar of a man who released all of those souls, by slaying the monstrosities that they had become.”

“Why are you telling me all of this? Any of this?”

“Because you are in a fragile mental state and I am attempting to distract you. According to your wife, you are a curious person who enjoys learning new things, whether they are in your field of expertise or otherwise.”

“She told you that?”

“She and I spent an amount of time together over the last few days. I am a very good listener, although I do not believe that I excel at comforting others.”

“That,” Baseph said, “is an accurate assessment.”

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Jason dashed backwards, away from the wall barrier sealing one of the pathways in the four-way intersection. Aside from the one they had entered through the other tunnels were sealed as well.

“What is it?” Humphrey asked.

“I sensed something gold-rank. Not an essence user or a monster. One of the Purity converted, I think, but I pulled my perception back before I got a good sense of it.”

“Did it notice you?” Sophie asked.

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “The converted have poor senses in general, from what we’ve seen, and it’ll be worse in this place. I have to push hard to sense that far, though, so I wasn’t exactly being stealthy.”

“That’s the direction of the closest safe room, right?” Neil said. “The princess’ husband is the other way, so how about we go that way.”

"If the gold-ranker is one of the converted, we could likely handle it," Humphrey said. "Perhaps we should deal with it before it comes across someone that can't. As Neil said, the closest safe room is in that direction."

"That would make the someone that can't deal with it us," Jason said. "A gold-rank anything isn't to be taken lightly. If we had preparation, knowledge of its abilities and an advantageous environment, that would be one thing. Being stuck in a room with a gold-rank weaponised victim is another."

Neil tilted his head, tapping his ear with his palm as if trying to shake loose an obstruction.

"I could swear I just heard Jason say something sensible."

"But what if people need help?" Humphrey asked.

"Then we hope the gold rankers get to them in time," Jason said. "They almost certainly have arrived by now. Humphrey, listen to someone who has sacrificed his life more than once to help people. You have to know when you're walking up to the line and when you're stepping over. Going after that gold-rank converted would be way over, even if it were alone. Which it isn't"

"We're here to save the lives we can," Clive agreed, "not to throw more away over the ones we can't."

Jason looked at Humphrey's face, filled with frustrated reluctance. He stepped in front of him and put a hand on his shoulder, looking him square in the eye.

"I know what you're feeling," Jason said. "Something inside you is screaming that it can win if you want it enough. But it can't. Believe me. I've been *through this and worse*. Every person you can't save will be a scavenger gnawing at your gut and there's nothing you can do about that. You save the ones you can, regret the ones you can't and let them drive you to get stronger. Then, the next time, you can save more."

Jason gave Humphrey a sad smile. In his eyes, the big man was a silver-age comic hero, complete with wedge-shaped torso and a jaw so square it could be mortared into a wall. He did not do well stuck in a crappy, grimdark reboot. If Jason's time on Earth had taught him anything, it was that if you let the darkness take hold of you, it wouldn't stop pulling you down. There were worse things than saving the day with the power of quips.

"Come on," Jason told him. "The beautiful princess might be too strong to get captured in the first place, but her husband could use a storybook hero."

Jason slapped Humphrey's enormous bicep.

"That's you, bloke."

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The gold-rankers moved separately, undertaking different tasks. Ferringhaas was using his water and earth manipulation to establish safe pathways into and out of the complex, making his way slowly down through the facility's levels. Amos was using his powerful senses to find more time-critical situations in which to intervene. He moved through tunnels regardless of their water level, the liquid impeding him no more than the air. The barrier walls slowed him little more than the water as he smashed through them like a bullet passing through layers of glass.

As he moved, Amos left behind a trail of lingering aura, a trick he had picked up that used pure aura control rather than any ability. It was imbued with an inherent hostility towards Purity worshippers while offering comfort to anyone else. Any adventurer would inherently sense its friendliness and follow it one way or another, either to safety or to Amos. Any enemy bold enough to follow it to the dock would find a gaggle of adventurers waiting for them, which would go poorly. If they instead followed it to Amos, that would go worse.

The various chambers and tunnel sections occupied by more than water were what slowed Amos' progress. Trapped civilians and adventurers he released were able to follow his path back out, although the waist-deep water troubled the iron-rankers. With the icy cold of the sea depths, it made for an unpleasant trip to the dock.

Enemies were a different story. Most of the safe rooms and enemies had already been cleared from the upper levels, so Amos didn't sense any until his perception reached the central areas of the complex. The enemies he sensed that were trapped he left alone, but if he found a roaming group, he moved on them. As Jason had pointed out, being in an enclosed space with a gold-rank enemy was not healthy for silver-rankers and Amos left Ferringhaas' direction to take prisoners if possible to others.

Sensing a group of adventurers whose auras told a story of trouble, Amos made his way swiftly through the passages, at one point smashing through a tunnel wall because it was only a metre of solid, magically empowered stone. He found a team of adventurers moving with one of their members on a floating magical gurney, covered in burns that left strange patterns on the flesh. The others were all various levels of injured, despite the healer working as they moved, most of them showing at least some sign of the strange burn marks.

A bedraggled female adventurer with scorched armour waved her team to keep going as he stopped in front of Amos to report, marking her as the team leader. Amos ignored her, looking at the man on the gurney as he gestured the whole team to a stop.

"Healing impaired?" Amos asked in a gravel slurry voice.

“Yeah,” the healer grimly confirmed. He was working on the other team members and not the injured unconscious man covered in burns. “Nothing I have works. Potions, abilities; I even have some ointment specifically designed for burns with wounding effects, but nothing. We stopped to perform a ritual enhanced ability; still nothing. I just don’t...”

The healer shook his head and went back to healing another team member with a green glow that emitted from his palm.

“We encountered a gold-rank pure converted in the lower levels,” the team leader reported. “It was moving with a team of Purity essence users. We drove them off, or maybe they drove us off; I’m not sure at this point. We managed to kill one of the essence users, but they got one of ours and...”

She turned to look at the unconscious man as if moving her head was physically hard, mouth trembling as her face filled with impotent rage and creeping shame.

“...probably a second.”

“No,” Amos said, pulling a potion vial not from his belt in which they were lined up but from a dimensional pouch at his belt. The vial glowed brightly with blue, gold and silver light.

“Is that a superior miracle potion?” the healer asked, looking on in awe.

“Greater,” Amos said.

“Greater?” the team member being healed exclaimed. “Do you know what that’s worth?”

Amos glanced at the man, his square brick of a face etched with disdain before turning back to the unconscious man.

“Not as much as this,” he said and shoved the unconscious man’s mouth open with his fingers before pouring in the vial and then clamping the mouth shut with his hand.

The result was immediate as transcendent light started shining from within. The strange burn marks started to fade, dissolving into rainbow smoke that formed a noxious cloud over the gurney. The team backed off while Amos ignored it, his eyes locked onto the man who was glowing with increasingly bright light.

After the light dimmed, they saw the man on the gurney stirring but still unconscious. There was no injury they could see remaining, although the blood, grime and tattered clothes showed that there had been plenty. Just as the light faded to nothing, another light shone from his body, this one silver.

“Gift transfiguration?” the healer muttered. “Lord Pensinata, this man is going to owe you deeply.”

“And I’ll collect,” Amos said. “There’s always work to be done.”

## Chapter 563

### Keep it Light

The team was only one tunnel segment away from Baseph Rimaros, but that segment was filled with water.

“It should be fine,” Clive said. “It’ll drain into the hole we came up through.”

As Clive went to work on bringing down the next barrier wall, Jason reached out through Shade to contact Baseph. Baseph was still hunched against the wall when a new voice emerged from his shadowy companion, Shade.

“Lord Rimaros,” the voice said. “We’ll have you out of there shortly.”

“Who are you?” Baseph asked.

“I was a retail stationery assistant manager, and good at my job, until I committed the ultimate sin and testified against other retail stationery assistant managers gone bad. Retail stationary assistant managers that tried to kill me, but got the woman I loved instead—ow! Hey, that kind of—ow! That was right on the ear. What? I know I’m silver-rank, what about it? I should never have let you all listen in with voice chat.”

“Hello?” Baseph asked uncertainly. “Shade?”

“My name’s Jason,” the voice returned, now sounding sullen. “Don’t worry, mate; we’ll have you out of there in a jiffy.”

“Uh, I hesitate to ask again, but who are you? Adventurers?”

“Yep.”

“How did you respond so quickly to the incursion? Did the Amouz family guards get the signal out?”

“No,” Jason said, the amusement gone from his voice. “Unfortunately, the enemy caught them by surprise before they could. As for what did happen, that’s restricted information. Your wife might tell you, although I’m pretty sure she shouldn’t.”

“How bad is it out there?”

“We’re not sure. Communication is tricky here, as you know, but we came in knowing the potential for the facility to be sabotaged as a defensive measure. Preparations were made to save as many lives as possible.”

“I... I was the one who sabotaged the facility.”

“I know, Lord Rimaros,” Jason said softly.

On the tunnel section where the team was, Jason cut off the communication between himself and Shade, then turned to Humphrey.

“Let’s make sure he doesn’t see the floating bodies when we’re going back the other way, yeah?” Jason said. “This bloke’s aura has so much guilt in it he’s just about ready to crack.”

As Clive continued preparing the ritual to disable the wall barrier, Jason returned to his conversation with Baseph.

“We’re an adventuring team that is part of a comprehensive rescue effort, evacuating the complex. First priority is saving lives, and it’s a lot harder for the bad guys to break into the safe rooms when the tunnel in front of them is flooded.”

“Are we sure Jason is really helping?” Sophie asked.

“For the purposes of keeping that guy from losing it,” Neil said, “yes, he is. Lord Rimaros will be harder to deal with if he’s panicking or shutting down completely.”

Baseph couldn’t hear the others through Shade and Jason kept talking to help keep him balanced.

“Things have gotten a little complicated and we don’t have the resources to make it all the way back to the top. We’re going to get you out of there and then join the people in a nearby safe room. From there, we’ll wait it out until a more thorough recovery operation is organised.”

It didn’t take long before Clive told the group to brace and he dropped the barrier, letting the flooded section of tunnel wash out. The water level quickly dropped as it rushed past them, eventually draining into the hole leading down to a lower tunnel. Jason became shrouded in dark mist for a few moments, which cleared to reveal him in a white casual summer suit and matching Panama hat.

“Good idea on dropping the dark reaper of blood look,” Neil told him. “Everyone keep it light with the civilians. If we act like the situation is no great crisis, they won’t believe it, but they’ll be at least a little reassured.”

“Have you been taking lessons on mental health from Arabelle?” Jason asked him.

“No, of course not,” Neil said. “Why would I, a healer, take the time to learn about an aspect of healing from a gold-rank healer from my own church – of the Healer – with incredible expertise in her field. Of healing.”

“You said ‘healing’ quite a lot there. I never even noticed you were taking lessons.”

“It’s not all about you, Jason.”

“I did save the world a couple of times.”

“Which suggests you didn’t do a great job the first time.”

“I did my best.”

“Oh, I have no doubt you did.”

“That’s a little hurtful.”

“Did Humphrey and I start a thing?” Sophie asked. “If we’re all going to be pairing off, I definitely won out taking first pick. I really would have imagined Belinda and Clive happening before you two.”

“Life is full of little surprises,” Humphrey added as Jason and Neil looked at them in horror.

“Surprise biscuits?” Belinda asked.

“You just finished eating a gingerbread man,” Humphrey told her.

Belinda hung her head.

“Don’t give me that look,” Humphrey told her.

Clive was keeping his attention on the magic diagram he was drawing in the air with his power.

“Just so you all know,” he pointed out, “there’s a guy on the other side of this wall watching us be very professional adventurers.”

“He can’t hear us though, right?” Jason asked.

“No,” Clive told him.

“Then he probably does think we’re professionals.”

“Not in that hat,” Neil said.

“You wish you could pull off this hat.”

“Yeah,” Neil admitted wistfully.

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Jason moved ahead of the group as they approached the tunnel intersection where Jason has sensed the gold-rank Purity converted. He extended his senses once more, as carefully as he could while pushing through the suppressive effects of the deep granite the tunnels were carved from.

“Nothing,” he called back to the group as he started heading back. “Looks like they moved on while we were digging out Bas, so we should be alright to move forward.”

“Bas?” Baseph asked.

“Don’t ask him questions,” Clive whispered conspiratorially, fully aware that Jason’s silver-rank senses would pick up everything. “Even if they seem sensible. You’ll find it’s best to let Jason wash over you and say nothing.”

“You make me sound like a packet of sensuous bath salts,” Jason said, rejoining the group. He looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodded. “I’m okay with that.”

“If he starts making sense on a regular basis, that’s when it’s time to worry,” Clive said.

“Don’t listen to them, Bas,” Jason told him as the group moved into the intersection. “They’re just jealous they can’t pull off a hat like mine.”

“That outfit does look good,” Humphrey conceded. “More of an outdoor style, though.”

“If you can convince the zealots to attack a beachside bar next time,” Jason told him, “I’m not going to stop you.”

“It would be nice to not be so busy,” Neil said. “Rimaros would be a nice place to take a holiday once the monster surge is over.”

“Seconded,” Jason agreed.

“Rimaros is a great place for that,” Baseph said. “The post-surge festivals here are world-famous.”

“That’s true,” Humphrey said.

Baseph’s brief smile faded.

“I’m not so sure how it will go, this time. Even buried under the ocean we’ve heard how things are going up there. I didn’t even see Liara after the attack on Rimaros.”

Jason frowned, knowing that Liara had been in the thick of it deep in the bowels of the flying city.

“These are dark days,” Jason said. “I’m a lot younger than you, Bas, but I’ve seen my share of dark days. If I know that they always come to an end, you must too.”

Baseph nodded, then his eyes drifted down the other unsealed tunnel as they reached the intersection. Two of the four tunnels weren’t blocked with wall barriers, both the one the team had originally come through and the one they had followed to retrieve Baseph.

“That way?” Baseph asked.

“No,” Humphrey said firmly. “Not that way. Clive?”

Something about Humphrey’s rigid denial had Baseph’s attention fixated on the open tunnel as Clive worked on breaching the next barrier wall.

“There’s something down there, isn’t there?” he asked.

“Yes,” Neil told him, not trying to lie.

“Something you don’t want me to see.”

“Our job,” Humphrey said, “is to get you and as many other people as we can out of this alive. You going down there hurts us more than helps, so I’m going to ask you not to go down there and also to not ask why.”

“Meaning that whatever is down there is worse than what I’m imagining,” Baseph said. “It’s people who died because of what I did, isn’t it?”



The team shared a look, and then Neil gave Baseph a nod. After a moment, Baseph nodded back.

“I think you’re right,” he said. “I don’t think I’m ready to see that.”

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The safe rooms were more than just secure doors, although the ten centimetres of magically reinforced metal covered in dangerous-looking sigils were definitely that. Certain varieties of hostile magic were designed to look like explosive traps, from the design of the ritual patterns to the way they glowed. The sigils on the door slowly pulsed an ominous red, invoking the feel of staring down the throat of a fire-breathing monster.

The obvious choice when attempting to intrude was to dig into the room straight through the wall. Beyond just the doors, though, behind the stone walls, the entire safe room was sheathed in thick metal, laid with traps less overt than the door sigils but no less potent. The safe rooms were designed to live up to their name, and while very little could shut out a gold-ranker, even they would not have an easy time gaining access. As for a group of silver-rankers, the difficulty was considerably greater.

Baseph had destroyed his master key to the safe rooms because of the very real threat of being captured in the process of carrying out his sabotage.

“I’m sorry,” he told Jason and his team. “I did everything wrong.”

“You did something,” Jason said. “You have to at least try something to get it wrong. Better to seize your fate than just accept it. Better to die fighting than lay down and take it. I’m something of an authority on this.”

“I’ll try again,” Baseph said, stepping up to the door.

“You need to open up and let us in,” he yelled.

“No,” a female voice came back.

Baseph grumbled under his breath.

“People hiring their goddamn cousins,” he muttered, before raising his voice again.

“Dammit, Karen, it’s me, Baseph. I’m with a team of adventurers.”

“Then you should be fine,” she yelled back through the door. “Also, you could be a shape-shifter.”

“How would that help?” Baseph yelled. “You can’t see me.”

“Lady,” Sophie yelled, “you better open this door or my foot is going to shape-shift your ass!”

Baseph shook his head and stepped back from the door.

“I don’t know who put her in charge of letting people in,” he said.

“Clive, can you open this door?” Humphrey asked.

“Not any time soon, and not without damaging it,” Clive said. “And most likely damaging us worse.”

“Which would defeat the purpose of a safe room,” Neil added.

“What we need is Belinda’s expertise,” Clive said.

Baseph turned in confusion to look at a person he’d been introduced to earlier, along with the rest of the team.

“Aren’t you Belinda?” he asked her.

“Yes,” she said with a bright smile. “I like stealing things and recordings of oiled up—”

Sophie’s hand clamped over Belinda’s mouth and she firmly led her friend away.

“Do we try for another safe room?” Humphrey mused aloud.

“I’m running perilously short on ritual materials that will get us through doors and walls,” Clive said. “We could maybe reach another safe room and maybe not.”

“Plus, there are gold-rank bad guys roaming around,” Jason said. “I’m not sure we should even have been yelling like that.”

“Other options?” Humphrey asked.

“Gordon could break down barriers and through walls with his beams,” Jason said. “It would take a lot longer than Clive and his rituals—”

“Which are already quite slow,” Clive added.

“—but slow is better than stopped,” Jason finished.

The team were mulling over a selection of poor options when the sigils on the door dimmed and it moved back, then slid to the side to open. As it did, the voices from inside became audible.

“...no telling who they really are.”

“Andres, did I say ‘stop Karen from taking over’ or did I say ‘take a nap and let her run rampant?’”

“You were taking a nap.”

“I’ve been awake for... oh, hey, boss. Sorry about that.”

The team started filing into the room when Jason started wildly gesturing for them to hurry.

“Quick! Get in and shut the door.”

The team did as instructed, rather than question and the door was quickly shut behind them.

“Gold-rank?” Humphrey asked.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “It looks like they swung back around.”

## 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.”

## Chapter 565

### A Significantly Different Paradigm

Jason's team all looked to him with grim expressions.

"Maybe we don't have to be so drastic," Neil suggested. "Instead of trying to portal all the way out, Jason opens one a couple of tunnels away and we leave nothing but an empty room for the enemy."

"Is that viable, Jason?" Humphrey asked.

"Maybe," he said. "If I force it. I can sense that the portal won't want to open."

"Won't want to?" Humphrey asked.

"You've got a teleport power," Jason said. "Have you used it, down here?"

"No," Humphrey said. He'd been ignoring the option because it was much less intrinsic to his power set than Jason's shadow teleport, which he suddenly realised he hadn't seen Jason use since they left the dock. Jason's shadow-blending, unpredictable movement and ability to hide his aura made his conventional stealth tactics almost seem like shadow jumping, but Humphrey hadn't seen him use the real thing.

Humphrey concentrated on his own teleport power, not using it but running his mana through the pathways that would. He felt resistance, like trying to push through the webs of a monstrous spider, complete with an instinctual sense of danger.

"It doesn't... feel safe," he said.

"That's because it's not," Clive said. "Anchor points are critical in any form of dimensional translocation, from turning intangible to teleportation and portals."

"As a naturally intangible entity," Shade said, "I can confirm that employing physical force in this place feels difficult."

"The deep granite here doesn't just impede magical senses and portals," Clive said. "It's much more sophisticated than that, but those are the most prominent practical effects. More important than how it affects the range of portals is the way it makes potential destinations unviable."

"That's true," Baseph said approaching from the group of gathered civilians. "Even very powerful essence users don't portal deeper than the docks, even when they could."

"That's because portal destinations need to be magically sound," Clive said. "The start point can be shakier because you're there in person and your essence ability will use your own senses to autonomically adapt, unless it's too unstable, in which case the portal won't work. That threshold is much lower with the destination, but you can force things, such as by pushing in more power. Consuming a spirit coin, for example."

“Let’s do that, then,” Neil said.

“No,” Clive said. “Portals normally won’t open to an unstable destination because portals are, by nature, very stable effects. Every instance of a portal mishap the Magic Society has on record is from someone using external aids, like a spirit coin, to open a portal in an unstable destination.”

“Isn’t that exactly the plan with this portal thing you and Jason have been working on?” Sophie asked.

“No,” Clive said. “Jason is talking about opening a portal beyond the reaches of this complex. The danger is to him. If he opens a portal to anywhere inside the complex, the danger is to every person who steps through it.”

“I don’t think we have a lot of time left to choose,” Neil said, pointing. The team turned to look at the door, which was starting to faintly glow with heat.

Jason looked to Humphrey, whose face creased with anger.

“What if I ate a diamond-rank coin?” Humphrey asked. “That might be enough strength to let me kill the people outside.”

“That wouldn’t most likely kill you,” Clive said. “It would definitely kill you. Jason has more soul strength and his essence abilities give him the ability to handle excess mana, which might – might – be enough that he doesn’t die if we work very, very hard. What that coin *would* most likely do is overload you with so much power that you’re crippled before you have a chance to face them. But I’m not telling you anything you don’t know.”

“Humphrey,” Jason said softly. “We don’t have time to clutch at any more straws than the one we’ve already got.”

Humphrey stormed away and lashed out with a kick that warped a metal table, wrenched it from the floor it was bolted to. It shot across the room, gouging the metal of the roof and a wall before thudding to the floor, no longer recognisable as furniture.

“That’s a yes,” Jason said and marched over to Melody, whipping her hood off and tossing it to Sophie. He yanked Melody to her feet, bringing them face to face. Jason had grown a little taller with rank-ups but was still not a large man and they were of roughly equal height.

“I told you that...” she said with a serpent’s smile before trailing off, unsettled by something in Jason’s alien eyes.

“There he is,” she said. “Nice to meet you, Mr Asano.”

“I’m going to open a portal,” he told her. “We can’t make you choose to go through, but you can choose to go.”

She looked at him with a curious expression.

“You can’t portal out of here. That’s impossible.”

“I’m going to do it anyway. Your choice is between going through the portal or us leaving your corpse behind when we do.”

“That, young master Geller,” she said, not taking her eyes from Jason, “is how to be intimidating. The resolve to follow through.”

Jason shoved Melody toward Sophie.

“Clive, prep the others,” he said.

As Jason once more made an archway out of cloud-stuff, Clive started briefing the others.

“Neil, Jason is going to be in a very bad way after he uses this power. His soul will be producing mana of a significantly greater concentration than his body can handle, like a tap that won’t shut off.”

“That will cause his body to break down,” Neil said. “That kind of damage is extremely resistant to healing.”

“Which is why you’ll need to do whatever you can for Jason. Baseph, we need this portal to be open for the smallest amount of time we can manage, so get your people organised into lines. They have to rush through as soon as it’s open. Shade, you already know what you and I have to do.”

“Yes,” Shade confirmed.

The cloud stuff archway Jason had formed shifted in colour from white to black, like ink spilling through milk. After it had turned entirely void black, blue and orange light started glowing from within. Jason held out one hand and the dark cloud-stuff solidified, turning into a marble-like substance. The archway remained empty, however, no portal opening.

With one hand still held out toward the archway, Jason used the other to take an item from his inventory. It looked like an ostrich egg made of gold, silver and blue transcendent light. To every aura sense in the room, it was a bottomless ocean of raw, unadulterated potential energy; power incarnate, like the clay from which the universe was moulded.

“What is that?” Melody asked in a half-whisper. The only answer she received was a sharp smack on the back of the head from her daughter.

A line of darkness, dancing like black fire, appeared at the base of the arch. The shadowy flamed turned silver and started rising to fill the arch until the opening was full of silver light. The light shifted slowly to a mix of gold and silver, flecked with blue. Then the gold turned orange as the silver turned back into black and the blue expanded. The final result was a dark void in the archway containing a blue and orange cloud nebula.

As that was happening, Jason started shining with transcendent light. This immediately alarmed his companions as it looked as if he'd managed to load himself down with his own devastating holy afflictions.

"Go," he said, his voice strained.

"Do you have a feel for how many people get through before it collapses?" Clive asked.

"GO!"

The single word Jason roared was less a human sound than the bellow of ship's horn, reverberating with an aura so powerful and unrestrained that some of the iron-rank civilians started screaming with terror fear and pain.

Clive braced his shoulders, glanced over the others and then went through. Sophie shoved her mother up to the portal.

"Choice time."

Melody didn't respond or hesitate moving straight through the portal. Sophie was only surprised for a moment before following her through.

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Clive was used to the slight disorientation of portal travel, but what he experienced when emerging from Jason's special portal was on another level. He staggered away from the arch as Melody followed through, quickly followed by Sophie. Melody fell over while Sophie stood in place, swaying for a moment before grabbing Melody and dragging her out of the way.

Civilians started spilling through, stumbling and falling to the ground. With a grunt, Clive moved to pull them out of the way to make room for those that followed, Sophie doing the same. Many were violently ill, although any mess that splashed to the floor was neatly drained away into the dark cloud material that made it up.

They were in a large room in the cloud house that was actively changing around them. The white cloud-stuff was turning dark, plain black. The furniture in the room sank into the floor as the walls expanded outward. The ceiling pulled away, opening the room up to the sky.

Neil and Baseph came through in the middle of the civilians. Neil recovered quickly and started helping people, while Baseph took longer to recover before doing the same. The civilians weren't doing well, especially the low-rankers and the non-celestines, whose resistance to astral effects help inure them. An iron-rank elf and human went into seizures from the effects of the modified portal.

The aura beating down on them didn't help anyone, pulsing like the heartbeat of a giant beast. The cloud house was in no way hiding its nature as a spirit domain with an all-encompassing version of Jason's aura crushing down on everyone inside, tyrannical and utterly unyielding. The only grace was that it was not currently hostile, even to Melody who crawled into a corner, momentarily forgotten.

After the last of the civilians were through, Humphrey and Belinda came through, at an angle to fit through the arch as they supported Jason between them. They each had an arm slug under one of his, while the reality core rested lightly in his hands. Jason was incandescent with transcendent light, glowing brighter than the egg-shaped core he was holding.

Belinda and Humphrey staggered but powered on, carrying Jason forward. Clive jumped in front of Jason, who was almost too bright to look at, his head lolling, semi-conscious at best.

"Jason!" Clive yelled at him. "You can stop!"

Clive grabbed Jason's head between his hands.

"SHUT DOWN THE PORTAL!"

Jason looked at Clive with bleary, confused eyes and Clive yanked the reality core from Jason's hands, tossing it away. The transcendent light filling the portal sputtered out and the marble-like stone turned back into cloud-stuff, then was absorbed into the floor. Jason had barely been supporting himself at that point and he stopped trying, only Humphrey and Belinda holding him upright.

Jason regained his own feet, shrugging the pair off and holding out his hand, unsteady but determined. He opened a portal to his spirit realm, hoping it could siphon the excess energy from his body. He stumbled toward the archway, only for the power within his body to react violently. The archway collapsed and Jason was thrown violently back as a bright flash flared between them. The soft wall cushioned Jason's impact and Humphrey rushed to catch him before he fell.

Baseph and Sophie were already clearing the room, shoving civilians out a door. Neil was looking to the ones who had seizures.

"Look after the civilians," Clive said to Neil. "We have a short window before the mana starts eating Jason away, so use it to help them and then come back."

Neil nodded and crouched down over the pair having seizures.

"Help me get them out of the building," he said to Baseph. "This aura isn't doing them any favours."

"What is this place?" Baseph asked.



“Work today, questions tomorrow.”

Clive helped Humphrey and Belinda lay Jason carefully down in the middle of the room. Shade's bodies swept out of Jason's shadow in a crowd, surrounding him. The closest ones reached out to touch him while others touched them, expanding out like a spider's web as they started collectively draining mana out of Jason. Clive stood over Jason and also started draining his mana with a spell.

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#### Ability: [Eldritch Imbalance] (Balance)

- Spell (drain, magic, channel).
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None (channel).
  
- Current rank: Silver 3 (19%).
  
- Effect (iron): Drain mana from the target for as long as the spell is channelled. Level of drain scales higher based on the target's current mana relative to their maximum mana.
  
- Effect (bronze): While being channelled, periodically inflicts [Mana Imbalance] on enemies with less mana than the caster.
  
- Effect (silver): Gain an alternate version of the spell that is instantaneous instead of channelled and inflicts a small amount of withering damage instead of draining mana. This is an execute ability, but the damage escalation scales with low mana instead of low health.
  
- [Mana Imbalance] (affliction, magic, stacking): Mana drain abilities have an increased effect on the target. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

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Normally, when Clive used his mana drain spell, the rank of the target was irrelevant. Whatever grade of mana came from them, the spell refined or, in the case of higher-rank targets, diluted it into mana appropriate to Clive's rank. When he drained mana from Jason it was like injecting lava and he screamed as the mana entered his body, breaking the channelling effect.

The stream of mana that had briefly passed from Jason to Clive had not been the usual blue but a bright silver-blue. The same mana was leaking from Jason on its own, passing through his skin like sweat, along with blood. Jason's white suit started dissolving in patches, the areas around the holes staining with blood. Clive noted that the cloud house appeared to be leeching the aggressive foreign mana from Jason. They had hoped it would when postulating ways to increase Jason's survivability but anything to do with his spirit domain was guesswork.

Clive glanced at the Shade bodies spread around Jason, who had formed some kind of circuit, draining mana from Jason and passing it through themselves like a network. Clive could actually see the mana pass through them like a bucket chain, being diluted as it spread amongst all the bodies. Steeling himself, Clive started channelling his spell again, gritting his teeth as Jason's enhanced mana passed into his body.

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Humphrey, Sophie and Belinda were still evacuating civilians from the room. The higher-ranked bronze and the two silvers were the last of the civilians, left due to better enduring the tyrannical aura flooding the room. Sitting on the floor where he had sat to recover from passing through the portal, one of the silver-rankers spotted the glowing ostrich egg of the reality core. Thinking about his personal storage power, he looked around and saw everyone's attention on either Jason or the exit. He slowly and casually shuffled towards the reality core until a massive sword, shaped like a dragon wing was conjured in front of his face.

"Rethink that move, friend."

With the pervasive aura of the spirit domain, he hadn't noticed Humphrey's approach. He looked up and nodded eagerly.

"Time to go," Humphrey said coldly.

Getting up, the man followed Humphrey and the last of the other civilians out.

\*\*\*

After quickly assessing that none of the civilians would die from the savage portal crossing, Neil dashed back into the cloud house. The outside he left to Taika, Travis and Gary who had been in the cloud house when the team portalled in. They had come running with the changes to the house and been immediately tasked by Humphrey with civilian-wrangling.

Even the exterior of the cloud house had transformed into the same black cloud stuff, the ordinary building façade completely gone. The house was going through changes that Neil was fairly sure were larger than they should be without the house being returned to the flask for redeployment. He ignored the errant thought as he raced back inside.

Reaching what was now a large open platform at the top of the house, he moved through the swarm of Shades crowding Jason. Sparks zapped him as he passed through, like pumped-up static electricity. The Shades were turning the wrong colour, a silver-blue starting to stain their normal uniform black.

Neil found Clive draining bright blue mana from Jason in a stream as thick as one of Humphrey's thighs. Jason was still glowing bright but the light dimmed slightly every so

often, as if the mana inside him were breathing. Neil crouched down next to where Jason lay.

Aside from the blood and mana seeping through his skin, Jason looked fairly intact, if delirious. His head moved from side to side as if he were confused and looking for something, but his eyes were closed, although light shone through the eyelids. Neil's perception ability, Eyes of Opportunity, allowed him to see the vulnerabilities of people. Because of this, he understood that Jason was in a far more fragile state than he appeared.

The underlying framework of any entity existing in physical reality was its magical matrix. This was true even for intangible entities like Shade, with no physical body. Neil could see that the overcharged mana Jason's soul was dumping into the magical matrix of his body was breaking it down on a fundamental level. If not for Jason's formidable soul strength regulating the release of mana at least a little, his magical matrix would have broken down already.

Unfortunately, there was little Neil could do about Jason's condition. Repairing the body as it started to break down would marginally delay the collapse of the magical matrix by maintaining the platform in which it resided, but the impact would be limited. Neil immediately saw that Shade and Clive pulling the mana from Jason was far more effective than anything Neil could do.

Instead, he turned his attention to Shade and Clive. The mana they were both taking in was likewise negatively impacting them, although not so drastically as the power that left Jason helpless on the floor. Shade appeared to be spreading the mana across his bodies to minimise the degradation of his magical matrix and was, for the moment, alright. Clive, on the other hand, was building up dangerous levels of the caustic mana.

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An unexpected effect of Clive's drain spell was how quickly it pulled mana from Jason. The strength of the drain effect was predicated on how much of their maximum mana pool the target currently had filled. Jason was stuffed with well beyond his baseline limit and almost certainly would be dead if his own powers didn't allow him to do something similar. As a result of this mana level, Clive was pulling more mana out of Jason than he thought the spell was even capable of. Clive's maximum mana pool was far greater than an average essence user of his rank, but he quickly found himself with a full tank.

Clive stopped channelling the mana drain spell and started collecting the massive power currently burning his insides. He raised his hand to the sky, tilting his head back as he gathered the mana searing through him in preparation for launching another spell.

Neil recognised what Clive was about to do.

“Want a boost?”

“No,” Clive said. “I need to spend the mana.”

“Right,” Neil said, nodding. His bolster spell would up the power and reduce the cost of an ally’s ability. What Clive needed now was to purge all the mana he could.

Clive’s Wrath of the Magister spell was the most powerful instantaneous damage spell the team has access to. It was also the most mana-hungry by far, becoming more powerful the more mana Clive pumped into it. As the mana poured out of him and he chanted the incantation, he silently promised never to complain about the spell’s mana-devouring nature again.

*“Feel the power of reality remade.”*

Clive had never unleashed such a powerful variant of the spell before. Not only was it the most mana he had ever pumped into it but that mana was supercharged. The result was a rainbow sky beam that quickly grew to almost the width of the room as it shot into the sky.

After a brief, staggered moment, Clive went back to draining mana.

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Neil tossed a healing bolt at Clive, the green energy helping Clive’s body from the strain of the mana coursing through it. It would have been water off a duck’s back to Jason, but Clive wasn’t in such a drastic state, so Neil dedicated his efforts where they were of actual use.

“How’s he doing?” Clive asked as he drained mana.

“Not good,” Neil said bitterly. “There’s only one thing I can do for him, but I need to hold off as long as I can or it might kill him.”

“What’s that?” Clive asked.

“My Hero’s Moment spell,” Neil told him.

“That’s good thinking,” Clive said. “It offers a big boost to maximum mana that will really help him.”

They both understood the ability, so neither gave voice to the danger. Once the spell ended, the subject’s maximum mana was temporarily reduced to below its starting value. If Jason was still being flooded with overcharged mana at that point, it would definitely kill him.

“Last minute,” Clive said.

“Yeah,” Neil said grimly.

\*\*\*

Humphrey, Sophie and Belinda watched as Clive, Neil and Shade worked to save Jason. An hour after their arrival, they were still desperately struggling to keep Jason alive. Between Jason's spirit domain leeching mana out of him and Clive and Shade doing the same, the light shining inside Jason was noticeably subdued, but it was not diminishing as swiftly as it needed to. The degradation of Jason's body's magical matrix was starting to show and he now looked like he was in the final stages of starvation. Neil healed him as best he could, but it was rubbing ointment on the burns of a man still on fire.

Clive was strained but by purging his mana each time his big spell came off cooldown he was in a stable loop of draining Jason and disposing of the mana without overtaxing his own body too badly.

Shade was a different story. While his array of bodies gave him a higher overall mana capacity than Clive, he had no effective purging mechanism. The first time it reached a critical point, mana flowed from all the bodies to collect in one at the edges of the web, close to the door. It dashed out of the room and, moments later, an explosion rocked the cloud house.

Expending the body hadn't been enough to completely clear out the mana from the others, but it had bought time and there were more bodies to spare. However, with each body that he dumped mana into and sent off to detonate, Shade's overall mana capacity dropped.

Neil had tried bringing Jason to his senses. If Jason had been conscious he could possibly have used the mana collecting inside him to replenish Shade's bodies, which would both help Shade's efforts and serve as a useful mana sump. Unfortunately, none of Neil's techniques had managed to rouse him and he feared that pushing harder would just make things worse.

"I feel so useless," he lamented. Clive said nothing, only glancing at the rest of the team, standing helpless at the edge of the room.

"I know," Neil growled. "But I'm the healer. Keeping everyone alive is the first thing I have to do. The first."

He examined Jason's body again, seeing that it was a wreck. It no longer had the physical integrity of a silver-ranker and barely that of a bronze.

"Neil," Shade said, grabbing Neil's attention. Shade never used his first name.

"Something is about to happen," Shade told him. "Gordon is going to need your assistance."

"How so?"

“You will need to point out the worst-affected parts of Mr Asano’s body. Only you can see the underlying pattern.”

“What then?” Neil asked.

“Then you will need to refrain from intervening, regardless of what happens,” Shade said. “This is true for everyone in this room.”

Sophie looked over at her mother in the corner, then went over, hood in hand.

“Let me see,” Melody asked, her face holding an uncharacteristic sincerity. Sophie didn’t buy it.

“If you find a way to interfere,” Sophie told her, “you are going to live a very long time.”

Sophie pulled the hood over her mother’s head.

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Gordon manifested in the air above Jason.

“The most damaged parts of his body, Mr Davone,” Shade said to Neil.

“The extremities,” Neil said. “Any of them. Anything from the knees and elbows down is close to ruined, and the upper limbs aren’t much better.”

None of Jason’s body looked healthy as he became more and more withered and skeletal. To Neil’s eyes, however, it was even worse. Fundamental damage to the magical matrix of a body could be repaired so long as the soul was intact and the body was alive. It was an intensive and laborious process, however. Compared to the ease with which magic could mend flesh and bones it was an excruciating slog for healer and healed alike.

Jason’s companions watched his familiar float above him, surrounded by six orbiting eyes. The team all jumped when beams shot from the orbs and started cutting through Jason’s weakened flesh. Humphrey and Sophie took a step forward and Neil started, still crouched next to Jason. Clive was startled enough that it interrupted his channelling spell.

All four were startled again as they heard Shade’s voice raised to a shout.

“DO NOT INTERVENE!”

Gordon cut away Jason’s limbs just below the shoulder and hips, his force beams easily disintegrating the weakened flesh and bone. Blood did not spill from the cut stumps. Instead, leeches swarmed out, tightly packing themselves into the form of new limbs, melting together into new, healthy flesh.

The dismembered parts of Jason’s body broke down to goo within moments of being severed, dissolving into rainbow smoke. Neil looked once more at Jason’s body matrix and saw the newly-grown limbs had actually restored Jason’s matrix in those areas, making Neil wonder how that was even possible, his mind racing.

“What’s happening?” Humphrey asked, his voice heavy with threat.

“Oh, damn,” Neil said as realisation struck. “Jason’s leech familiar is connected to him on a deep soul level,” Neil said. “Unlike external magic from any healer – or even most of Jason’s own abilities – Colin can replace not just the flesh but the underlying magical matrix. Only when he’s replacing wholesale, though, not through the normal regeneration. But it means that Colin can restore Jason in ways that healing magic can’t. Very few abilities can heal on that level, and they’re almost always self-healing, like your Immortality power, Humphrey. The only external things I know of that do it are miracle potions and very high-rank healing powers. The powers that don’t resurrect anymore can now heal on a body-matrix level instead. It’s what the Healer gave them to compensate for what Death took away.”

Neil was interrupted by another Shade body leaving to rock the room with an explosion. With half of the bodies gone, the rate at which they were being expended was accelerating.

“Does this mean Colin can keep Jason alive until we’re done?” Sophie asked.

“No,” Neil said, looking over Jason’s body again. “Gordon, don’t cut off anything but his limbs. I know he’s a tough bastard, but he isn’t at his best right now. If you start digging into his torso, it’ll probably kill him before Colin can replace the flesh.”

“Meaning?” Humphrey asked.

“Colin buys us time because the extremities degrade faster than the central mass, but it’s still an uncertainty. Clive, you can start draining again.”

Clive mana drain was harsher than Shade’s and he had held off while Colin was regrowing the limbs. He nodded and cast his mana drain spell.

“The problem is the head,” Neil said. “Normally that wouldn’t be so bad because Jason’s body hasn’t had a brain for a while. It figures that he’s unconscious for such a prime joke opportunity. Jason’s head is degrading faster than his torso, but he’s fragile enough that cutting it off and growing it would kill him.”

“Wouldn’t that kill him anyway?” Clive asked.

“Of all of us, Jason could probably take it because of Colin. The rest of us would need some very good, very powerful and very quick healing magic.”

Another Shade body left, rocking the room with the now-familiar explosion.

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“My ability to continue draining Mr Asano is swiftly reaching its limit,” Shade said. He only had three bodies remaining, all of which were almost entirely blue-white instead of black. Two of them dimmed but only slightly as the third turned blue and rushed away.

The rest of the team now had room to crowd around Jason. They looked on seeing the glow inside him had dimmed considerably. Neil, who saw deeper, shook his head.

"It's too soon," he said. "If I use my spell on Jason now, it won't last long enough."

Clive stooped to cast another sky beam.

"Options?" he asked, after resuming his drain spell. "I'm all out."

Neil tossed another life bolt into Clive's overworked body.

"Me too," he said.

"Colin is at his limit of regenerating Mr Asano," Clive said. "His biomass is almost entirely expended."

Neil examined Jason's body yet again, seeing that if he waited any longer, the spell would probably kill Jason itself.

"If it wakes him up," Neil said, "It might let him burn off some mana remaking Shade bodies."

First, Neil used his Bolster ability to enhance the next power he used. He followed that up by chanting the incantation for Hero's Moment.

*"Now is the moment to seize the reins of fate."*

The team felt Neil's magic infuse Jason's body. It had numerous effects to enhance him, but it was the expanded mana capacity that would hopefully keep him alive. The time it took for the mana flowing from his soul at a slowly decreasing rate to reach the new limit gave Jason's body a reprieve and they saw him relax. Unfortunately, he did not awake.

"Neil, could you try forcing him awake again?" Clive asked.

"No," Neil said. "It'd kill him."

"Then what do we do?" Sophie asked.

"We hope the spell lasts long enough," Neil said, knowing that it wouldn't.

Gordon had retreated back into Jason after amputating Jason's limbs, but he appeared once more, this time floating around, moving back and forth in front of the team.

"He wants us to back off," Shade said. "All of us."

"I can't stop draining."

"It's not enough, Clive," Neil said as he stood up. "If Gordon has any idea at all, we have to go with it; it doesn't really matter what it is. Something is better than nothing, and I've got nothing. How about you?"

Neil and Clive shared a look and Clive stopped channelling his spell. They backed away with the rest of the team, including the two remaining Shade bodies.

"What is Gordon doing?" Humphrey asked.

"I genuinely have no idea," Shade said.



They all watched Gordon, hovering motionless over Jason. After a moment, he slowly floated upward as the eye orbs started rotating around him at a rapidly increasing pace. Suddenly all six started blasting out beams in staccato bursts, not at Jason but around him. Where the beams struck the floor of the cloud platform on which they stood, they left behind lines and sigils of blue and orange light.

"It's like your ability, Clive," Humphrey said. "He's drawing a ritual diagram."

"Did you know he could do that?" Clive asked Shade.

"I did not, Mr Standish."

"What's he trying to do?" Neil asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine," Clive said, peering at the diagram.

"It's really not," Neil said.

"Definitely not," Sophie agreed.

"That was an absurd thing to say," Humphrey said.

They looked on as Gordon worked, lapsing into silence. Belinda worriedly nestled up against Humphrey and he gently stroked her hair. Sophie gave them a brief side-glance but said nothing. Gordon's eyes all fired simultaneously, with absolute speed and precision.

"I think it's some kind of aura projection ritual," Clive said. "It's working off principles I've never seen, though. It's a significantly different paradigm to the..."

He trailed off as Gordon stopped working, but nothing happened. Then Gordon vanished, disappearing into Jason's aura again.

"Is that it?" Neil asked.

"Is Clive meant to conduct the ritual?" Sophie asked.

"I can't," Clive said. "I don't understand it enough."

They didn't move closer, wary of stepping into the intricate ritual circle that occupied the bulk of the room with glowing lines and sigils of blue and orange. As they looked on, unsure of what to do next, an eye orb appeared above Jason.

When Gordon was not manifested, Jason could use up to two of his orbs. A second one appeared over Jason, then a third, fourth, fifth and sixth in increasingly rapid succession. They started circling over Jason and the overcharged mana started seeping from his body to be absorbed by the orbs. The whole team's gaze was locked on them as they absorbed more and more mana. Each time they did, different sections of the glowing ritual circle started glowing brighter.

"Did you know he could do that?" Clive asked Shade again.

"I did not, Mr Standish."

“You should maybe have a little talk with your fellow familiar,” Clive said.

“He’s not traditionally talkative.”

As more and more of the ritual circle lit up, the enormous nebula eye that Jason’s spirit domain could call up manifested over the platform.

“Jason said that was some kind of defensive weapon, right?” Neil asked. “Maybe it’s going to burn off the mana with some kind of death beam.”

Clive tilted his head back and forth, his face conflicted. He stopped as he made up his mind.

“Neil, boost me,” he said.

“Are you sure?” Neil asked.

“I’m sure.”

“You said you don’t know what that ritual is.”

“Doesn't matter. As you said, it's something and we've got nothing, so let's push it all the way.”

“What are you talking about?” Humphrey asked.

“Doing something that’s probably stupid,” Clive said, “but it’s that kind of day. Jason would do it.”

“Which is how we got here!” Humphrey exclaimed.

“Do it,” Sophie said.

Neil used Bolster on Clive to boost his next power. Clive held his arms out in front of him and his life force started emerging from his body, shrouding him in a vibrant red glow, streaked with silver-blue. With a pushing motion using both hands, a stream of life force moved like a smoke trail, out of Clive and into the ritual.

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#### Ability: [Blood Magic] (Balance)

- Special ability (sacrifice).
- Cost: Variable health.
- Cooldown: None (channel).
  
- Current rank: Silver 4 (02%).
  
- Effect (iron): Consume your own life force to gain mana.
  
- Effect (bronze): Expend your life force to enhance the power of rituals and essence abilities employing rituals. Amount of life force required varies by ritual. Utilising life force other than your own for this effect leaves a mark on your soul that can be detected with sufficiently rigorous examination.
  
- Effect (silver): Expend your own life force to enhance the effect of spells.

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As soon as the trail of life force came into contact with the ritual circle, the trail grew thicker and the ritual drank it in, absorbing more life force. It especially devoured the silver and blue streaks coursing through Clive's life force, which brought him some relief. It was the overcharged mana Clive hadn't purged and he was happy to lose it. A lot of life force went with it, though, causing Clive to stagger heavily.

"Cut it off if it needs more than you've got," Neil warned him as life force continued to drain out. Neil used a life Bolt to replenish Clive's dwindling life force.

"Obviously."

The eye orbs continued absorbing mana from Jason and life force from Clive, Neil healing Clive regularly to compensate. Finally, every part of the ritual diagram was shining more brightly than it had when Gordon drew it. The orbs then moved to various points around the ritual circle, sinking into the floor. In the air above them, the great eye started to grow and change.

It was hard to see what was happening from directly underneath. The eye rapidly became a field of shadows, through which dark shapes moved like fish in a pond. It was vast, at least a kilometre across and just as high. In the centre of the field, an empty, hooded cloak appeared, darker than the shadows around it but limned with light and speckled with stars. Inside the cloak was a bright sky, like the one the field had displaced.

The aura of Jason's spirit domain rushed out like a tsunami.

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The Rimaros royal palace was on a sky island floating above Livaros, one hundred and twenty kilometres away from Jason's cloud house on Arnote. Soramir Rimaros was being briefed by Trenchant Moore on the latest information coming from the mining complex rescue operation when he turned his head in the exact direction of Arnote, his eyes going wide.

"What the fuck?"

Trenchant Moore dropped his clipboard.