

## Chapter 555

### Infiltrating the Stronghold

After sensing Vidal's approach, Jason had tamped down the aura of the cloud house to hide its nature as a spirit domain. Unlike with the people of Earth, anyone from Pallimustus with aura senses would immediately recognise the similarity to the aura of a temple. Jason couldn't hide that from someone with powerful senses, such as Liara, but with a freshly minted silver, like Vidal, it was viable.

Even so, Vidal obviously sensed something unusual from the way he looked around the place, Jason feeling the uncertainty and suspicion in the man's aura. This was an acceptable outcome for Jason, who was happy to leave people a little unnerved. Being off-kilter promoted honest reactions and undermined predetermined intentions.

"I should apologise for the games I was playing last time we met," Jason said as he led Vidal upstairs from the waterfall room. A smile crossed Jason's face as he read Vidal's emotions. This was something Jason was becoming increasingly adept at, using a combination of body language and emotion to assess what people were thinking. Having them a little unnerved made that easier.

Jason was fairly sure that Vidal didn't miss that Jason said he should apologise, without making an actual apology. Once again, the Adventure Society associate proved himself a sharp observer, which impressed Jason. After delivering Vidal to Sophie to conduct the debriefing, Jason went back downstairs to rejoin Clive.

"I like that guy," Jason said. "Maybe I should hire him."

"For what?" Clive asked.

"I don't know. After he gave me the cloud flask, Emir used to tell me that I should build up a staff. I'm not exactly sure what for, at this stage."

"You probably shouldn't go poaching Adventure Society officials when you don't have anything for them to do."

"That does sound like sensible advice."

"You should take it anyway," Clive said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're kind of famous for choosing the less-than-sensible option, Jason."

"I always make good choices."

"Of course you do. Now, let's go back to figuring out how to use the random stuff you picked up from great astral beings with questionable motives and immediately shoved into your soul."

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The underwater vessels that the Order of Redeeming Light used had been carefully crafted at great expense. The bespoke designs were customised not just for stealth but specifically for operating within the Sea of Storms. By tapping into the natural magical properties of the sea, the silver-rank vessels became far more effective than their already powerful and expensive systems would otherwise be capable of.

Although they were only silver-rank, the suppression systems of the vessels were exquisitely crafted. If they came close to one of the magical storms for which the region was named, they could hide from even very powerful gold-rank senses. A diamond-ranker could pick them up, but even they would only do so at a significantly decreased range.

The vessels were not just designed for external security, either. Aside from the designated pilot, the suppression systems of the vessel prevented the senses of any passengers from passing through the windowless hull. Any form of external communication, or even identifying their location, was impossible from within.

Only a small handful of designated pilots knew the locations of the order's various strongholds. Even amongst their number, none of them knew every location, the security protocols or the nature of the defences. Furthermore, the pilots were kept separate from other members of the order, preventing any potential for compromise. They had no friends, no hobbies and no interests; only duty. They rarely even spoke to anyone but the leaders of the various cells of the order.

As a result, the majority of the order was completely unaware of where their most important strongholds were located, regardless of how many times they had visited them. Even the cell leaders were on a need-to-know basis, with the pilots that worked with them still answering to Melody.

The hollowed-out mountain stronghold that Shade had occupied for the last few days had similar protections and restrictions. They were just as effective, if not more so, but were not as expensive. Having much more space to work with and no need to be emplaced on a moving vehicle, it was easier to install defences without the magical elements interfering with one another.

Shade had been dwelling inside the facility for the last few days since infiltrating the stronghold in the shadow of an order member as they left the Builder island. Sneaking around the facility, he was able to learn much about the order and the stronghold, but he had far from free reign. For one thing, there were internal security measures that kept him from the most secure areas of the stronghold. This included the nodes for the stronghold defences, the areas restricted to leadership and certain sensitive infrastructure sections,

like the water and air filters that made the underground complex liveable. The other high-security zones were the secure prisoner area and the exits to the stronghold.

Shade's stealth capability was extremely formidable. He was intangible, made of shadows and the aura strength he could push through his vessel was strongly affected by the soul of the man who summoned it. Jason's absurd aura strength didn't fully translate to his familiar, but it gave Shade's aura a significant boost. Shade's control of his aura was also superlative.

Despite Shade's prowess, he did not risk triggering the various high-security areas. That meant that he couldn't escape through the air and water filter intakes, or through the underwater tunnel that the vehicles used to access the dock. It also meant that he couldn't eavesdrop on the order leadership, who primarily restricted themselves to secure areas. Even when they did come into the common areas, they frequently employed privacy screens.

The secure areas also included the section of the facility where the order held their captive. With no access to the prisoner or the order leadership, Shade had spent his time learning what he could from the ordinary members. His favourite targets for eavesdropping were the highly chatty Rhett and Jaime, with whom he had arrived in the first place. Unfortunately, they spent a lot of time with the one member he most tried to avoid.

Kelleigh had pale skin, bright green eyes and an inferno of red hair. By Shade's assessment she was the greatest danger to him, even compared to the leadership. Her senses were sharper than the others and she had the feel of a sword in its sheath. From what Shade managed to overhear, she was also Melody's first choice for missions that absolutely needed to succeed.

Oddly, she spent the bulk of her recreation time with Rhett and Jaime, who stood out from the others. The vast majority of the order members had the blank-faced seriousness of magical compulsion. Shade had seen countless forms of control over the millennia, from mind-altering spores to vampirism to puppeteering implants. Even those members of the order who showed contention and ambition had a drone-like dedication to the order, Purity and their goals.

Kelleigh also demonstrated this blank-faced dedication around the others, except for Rhett and Jaime. There was a spark of humanity in them that led to the rest of the order subtly excluding them, leaving them to mostly keep their own company. It was odd, then, that the favoured Kelleigh would likewise spend time with them, her blank, fierce demeanour softening around the pair.

Shade was biding his time until he was able to contact his other bodies to reveal what he had learned. That did not include, unfortunately, his location. His senses had been cut off the moment he had entered the order's transport vessel in Rhett's shadow, first by the vehicle and now by the stronghold.

The exits were extremely secure, so there was no leaving to contact his other bodies. Shade's intangibility did not allow him to pass through large solid objects because of his nature as a living shadow, rather than a ghost-like entity. Even if he could have, he wouldn't have risked it. He suspected that the mountain's protections would have detected him at the very least, blocked him almost certainly and possibly destroyed him. A single body was no great loss and he had three of them with him, but once the order became aware of his presence, he would be hunted down.

Shade had been awaiting a chance to depart on one of the vessels but Melody had ordered a halt to all activity in the wake of the island raid. He had heard about an operation specifically related to Jason and his team, but it was being run out of another facility and Shade had only gleaned fragments of information.

Shade knew that his chance would come when the order made its next big move. Directly after the raid, as part of reasserting her authority, Melody had announced her plan to obtain the materials to set up their own construct factory. Key to this plan was the captive, Gibson Amouz, who held many secrets of the Amouz family and their mining operations. The information they could get from him would allow Melody to put her plan into action.

Since the capture of the prisoner, Melody and her second-in-command, Sendira, had been coming and going from the cells on a regular basis. When Melody finally emerged with a satisfied expression, Shade knew it would soon be time to move.

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Clive and Jason had struck a dead end with their project until they had access to an artificer with expertise in cloud flasks. Unfortunately, that level of expertise was almost impossible to find. Otherwise, using one as bait wouldn't have drawn the world's best young adventurers to Greenstone.

"I really think we'll need Emir to tell us who crafted the cloud flask in the first place," Clive said. "It's just that Sophie isn't exactly happy with Cal and Emir, right now."

"It's not like any bridges have been burned," Jason said. "Sophie is angry, but not to the point of breaking ties. It's more at Cal than Emir, anyway. Humphrey told me that Emir actually tried to help them until Constance told him off. And Sophie remembers that it was Emir who went against the Adventure Society to shelter her when she needed it the most.

This is a fight between friends because someone did something kind of crappy, not the advent of enemies.”

“Even so, we should put this aside until we find Sophie’s mother and deal with whatever fallout comes from it.”

“Agreed.”

Jason left Clive and went to find Belinda, who was on the roof, practising her aura control. She needed to have it as precise as possible, in case she had a chance to execute her plan.

“Care for a little cooperative training?” he offered.

“Please,” she said gratefully.

The fact that Jason’s absurd aura strength made him more comparable to a gold-ranker than a silver usually overshadowed the fact that his aura control was just as outrageous. Of the two factors, Jason was more proud of the control, as his strength was just a reflection of the beatings his soul had taken. His aura control was something he had painstakingly worked on and developed. Aura strength might be power, but aura control was skill.

It had started with Farrah laying Jason’s foundation back in Greenstone. From there, he had trained with Danielle Geller and studied the techniques of vampiric auras with Craig Vermillion. The Healer Priest, Carlos Quillido, had helped Jason restore his damaged soul after it was besieged by the Builder’s star seed. That same battle had given Jason an insight into his own soul that had expanded his aura manipulation horizons, to the point of using power suppression collars as training tools.

Jason has even studied the auras of his familiars, which were even more alien than those of vampires. It was difficult to glean anything from them, operating so differently to the aura of an essence user, but Jason managed to learn from each. Shade’s use of aura was nuanced and delicate, with expertise that even Jason’s talent would take centuries to replicate. Following Shade’s example helped Jason restrain his aura for stealth purposes, although his efforts remained crude next to Shade.

Shade was so ancient that Jason felt not even a little competitive. Once Jason was strong enough to give Shade a vessel whose aura matched Shade’s potential, Jason wondered if anything in the cosmos would be able to detect him.

Colin’s aura was utterly unrelenting. It was bizarre and hard to get any gains from, but Jason has used the insights he managed to gleam to enhance his already superior ability to fend off aura suppression. As for Gordon, that was a special case. Gordon already enhanced Jason’s aura strength, as a passive effect while not manifested. That was why,

despite Gordon being the most alien of all, Jason found the way the familiar used his aura the easiest to learn from. Studying it improved Jason's aura control regarding suppressing the auras of others.

Jason, as it turned out, had a talent for adventuring. Between hard experience, expert training and no small number of skill books, he had built a skill set that allowed him to stand with guild elites without shame. He might not be a match for Rufus' swordsmanship or Sophie's mobility, but he would pit his aura manipulation, irrespective of strength, against anyone of his own rank. Even in Rimaros, a land of elites, Estella Warnock was the only silver-ranker who could hold her own, and she had four aura powers.

Jason's team were all silver rankers with advanced aura senses, so they were fully aware of how absurd Jason's aptitude in this area was. This was why Belinda had been asking Jason to help her with her shape-shifting power. It wasn't something she used a lot, but a crucial part of any shape-shifting power was aura manipulation. There was little point in changing a face when even basic aura senses would see through the deception.

Belinda's power gave her an edge in aura manipulation and also made hiding her aura much easier, making her second only to Jason in stealth amongst the team. Her power was especially good at helping her blend her aura into crowds, making the people around her overlook her presence. This was very similar to a technique Jason developed studying the vampiric aura of his friend Craig, which Belinda had picked up with slightly annoying ease.

Jason found it an interesting experience helping Belinda master the ability. Her power simply gave her the ability to do what he had painstakingly studied and trained to accomplish, giving him a fresh perspective on skill books. In this case, it was a power, rather than a skill book, but he discovered a new empathy for those who complained about others using shortcuts. Jason knew it wasn't that simple, which was why Belinda's power hadn't made her Jason's equal. It would take time and skill to truly master the effect, and he was helping her just as Rufus had once helped him.

Jason was less expert with aura disguises, which was what Belinda wanted to focus on. Vidal, who was currently talking with Sophie, had seen through the cracks in Jason's disguise during an early, ill-advised experiment. Belinda's power once again gave her an edge in this, allowing her to quickly pick up the techniques that Jason was still refining through painstaking practise.

"That's good," Jason said, looking at the two copies of himself sitting in front of him on the roof. The one without a bushy moustache had an aura that was very close to his own, except for a fatal flaw.

“I can’t match the aura strength,” Belinda said. “It’s pretty detectable, even when I’m restraining my aura, right?”

“No. you’ve done very well,” Jason said. “It’ll hold up to casual scrutiny, but not if someone gets rude and takes a hard poke. Some people will see through it, though, but I’m talking about gold and diamond-rankers who know my aura well and there’s not much you can do about that.”

“Good thing the plan isn’t to mimic you, then,” Belinda said. “You don’t find it ridiculous that there are gold and diamond-rankers that familiar with your aura?”

“I accepted ridiculous as my normal a long time ago. We can continue to practise this, but I think you’re ready. If we get the chance—”

“She will,” Shade interrupted, emerging from Jason’s shadow. “Mr Asano, invite Princess Liara to a voice chat.”