

Chapter 540

Not Really a Rules Guy

Belinda panned her gaze over the broken Builder constructs, destroyed not by adventurers but by the Purity worshippers that were their ostensible allies.

"I can only guess at what they want," she said. "Whatever they're after, they think it will be gone if they wait for us to come and go. Something that the Builder doesn't want them to take or, at least, didn't give them permission to. It has to be something valuable enough that they're willing to go against the wishes of what is – to our knowledge – the only ally they have. Valuable enough that they're willing to risk exposure and significant losses by sending this much of a force this close to Rimaros at the same time as a significant adventurer expedition."

She paced, absently tapping a finger to her lips as she looked around. The other adventurers remained silent, letting her think. Her eyes settled on the destroyed Builder constructs.

"Jason," she said. "You told us that those altered Purity slaves had clockwork cores in them, right? The same things the Builder uses to create his minions?"

"That's right," Jason confirmed. "They've somehow erased the Builder's influence and replaced it with Purity's, but they have the same origin as the Builder cores."

Jason's eyes lit up as he realised what Belinda was thinking.

"Oh," he said, sharing a gaze with Belinda. "Oh, I bet that's it."

"Care to share with the rest of the group?" Neil asked.

"It's no secret that the Purity church has as good as declared war on the rest of the world," Jason said. "They're preparing for a conflict, which means they need soldiers. While you were all operating out of Vitesse, you messed up their summoning of those messengers, but what if that's only one way they're bulking out their forces? What if they're trying to co-opt the Builder's method of mass-producing troops?"

"By using the modified cores," Clive said. "Is that viable without the Builder's cooperation? From the look of these destroyed Builder constructs, he and Purity's unlikely alliance seems to be on the outs."

"Which is why Purity's people are willing to take such a big risk here," Belinda said. "We know where clockwork cores come from. The Builder produces them with his clockwork kings," Belinda said, picking up the narrative.

"And we came to this island to destroy clockwork kings," Humphrey said.

“Exactly,” Belinda said. “We know that the Purity loyalists here belong to the Order of Setting Fire to Stuff or whatever they’re called. The ones that like to take things they consider unclean and purify them somehow, turning them into tools that they can use for themselves. What if they did that to a clockwork king to get the cores they have now? Maybe the Builder gave them one as part of whatever deal they made in the first place, but now they want to step up production. More clockwork kings means more cores, which means more fire-spitting mind-slaves for the Purity army. But what if the Builder cult won’t hand any more over?”

“Then they come for the ones here,” Clive concluded.

“But why wait until the island is crawling with adventurers to come get them?” Sophie asked.

“My guess would be they didn’t realise the clockwork kings were here,” Jason said. “If the Builder doesn’t want to hand them over, he wouldn’t tell them about it, assuming they even communicate at all anymore. And we have to assume that Purity has spies in Rimaros. They were a major church until just a few years ago; they have to have informants and sympathisers left. Maybe those spies heard about an expedition to wipe out some clockwork kings and that’s when they realised the kings were here for the taking.”

“Which would be why they’re here now,” Belinda concluded.

“We thought this beacon was an escape plan,” Humphrey said. “Instead, maybe it’s cover while they try and beat us to the clockwork kings.”

“How would they take them away?” Clive asked. “It doesn’t seem like the Builder wants to hand them over, so they’re unlikely to go quietly. Clockwork Kings are gold rank.”

“A question for later,” Humphrey said. “Liara is out of voice chat range at the moment, so let’s get the beacon down so we can fill her in, find our captured people and see about destroying those clockwork kings before Purity’s people get ahold of them.”

The two teams searched the building for the beacon projecting its disruptive aura across the island. The Purity adherents had trapped the approach but Belinda disabled each one with a running commentary of their “amateurish efforts.” As they drew closer to the source of the beacon, the intensity of the aura started to impact the adventurers. They all suffered from aura suppression and were affected by vertigo and headaches. Jason pushed his aura to the limits of his strength, barely managing to shield the others. One of the various traits his soul had picked up through its many traumas was the only reason he was able to resist.

Title: [Indomitable]

- Your repeated defiance in the face of more powerful enemies and willingness to sacrifice everything for a cause has marked your soul. Your resistance to aura suppression is further enhanced and ignores rank disparity.
 - Your aura signature has changed. Your unwavering resolve floods your aura and can be detected if your aura is examined by an aura sensing power or when projecting your aura. Allies within your aura have increased resistance to aura suppression.
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Jason's aura was an excellent tool for shielding his allies from aura suppression, but for all that his aura was powerful, its strength was not infinite. Against dozens of converted that could blend their auras into a single force, he barely managed to keep his own aura active. He couldn't shield his team from the purity-obsessed forces that combined their powers like a white supremacist Captain Planet. Only once enough of them died to diminish their collective aura was he able to push it back.

The aura produced by the beacon was stronger than a few dozen converted but it wasn't an actively hostile force. The suppression was only a side effect of their proximity and this time Jason was able to push back enough to shield his allies. It was a borderline thing, though, leaving him able to do little more than walk and concentrate on projecting his aura.

As their minds cleared, Team Work Saw felt Jason's aura enveloping them at full force. All of the power and strangeness that he normally kept hidden were on full display and they all turned startled gazes on him. Even Jason's own team hadn't felt his aura truly pushed as far as it could go and turned to look at Jason as his face was fixed in a determined grimace as he held off the aura.

"If we could hurry a little," he said through gritted teeth, "that would be really nice."

They moved on and tracked the beacon down in short order. It was a magical device similar to an orrery, hanging from the ceiling in a round room. It was made up of crystals linked by rods of brass and silver, with a large central crystal and around twenty more that got smaller the further they were from the middle. The central crystal was the size of a person's torso while the outer ones were no bigger than a fist. The larger crystals looked like natural formations while the smaller ones had been worked and faceted like gemstones. The crystals were in a variety of colours, from diamond-clear to muddy yellow-brown.

"Can we just smash it?" asked Henry, the leonid from Team Work Saw.

"We could," Clive said absently as he stood under the device, looking up as his eyes skittered across it. "The resulting magical detonation wouldn't inflict any physical damage, but it would probably feel like your soul was being plucked out and dropped into lava. It might not drive you insane and cripple your soul as your mind collapsed. Jason would probably be fine."

"In your own time, Clive," Jason said through gritted teeth. Being right next to the device was straining him to his limits. Clive worked with Belinda to examine the device using a few measurement tools pulled from their inventories.

"I don't think we can turn it off safely," Clive announced. "It's running through a cycle and interrupting the cycle wouldn't be good."

"How not good?" Humphrey asked.

"We'd basically be back to smashing it," Belinda said.

"How long will this cycle take, then?" asked Carlos, the leader of Team Work Saw. He was looking at the struggling Jason.

"Somewhere between half and a full day," Clive said.

"Minus the time it's been running already," Belinda added.

"Bugger that," Jason said. He gestured and a line of darkness appeared on the ground. An archway of dark crystal, sparkling with internal lights. Shadows then filled the arch with star-speckled darkness.

"I didn't think portals worked with this thing on," Carlos said, gesturing at the orrery.

"Jason's not really a rules guy," Neil said.

"Not a portal," Jason said. He making a spreading gesture and the archway grew larger, enough to accommodate the entire crystalline device. "Clive, unbolt that thing from the roof."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," Clive said.

"You know me," Jason grunted. "Bad ideas are kind of my thing."

Clive looked uncertainly at Humphrey, who shrugged his shoulders.

"Alright," Clive said. "Lindy, if you would?"

Belinda conjured a pair of socket wrenches on long poles, handing one to Clive. The Orrery was attached to a metal plate that was bolted to the ceiling and they started removing the bolts. Humphrey moved under the device, his strength more than able to take its weight as the plate loosened.

"Are you sure?" he asked Jason.

"Yes," Jason snarled. "Quickly, please."

Once the device was free of the ceiling entirely, Humphrey lugged it through the archway. As soon as it was gone, the overwhelming aura vanished and Jason dropped to his knees in relief, his own aura fading away. He closed his eyes, wincing for only a moment before wearily getting back to his feet and following Humphrey through the arch.

Deep under the ruined city, three servants of Purity had made their way through the city's even more ruined subterranean infrastructure. They had to fight their way through a few silver-rank Builder constructs as they neared their goal before finally arriving in a vast and startlingly intact chamber. That a space this large and this deep had survived undamaged spoke volumes on the integrity of its construction.

Most of the city's underground had been constructed from brick, but this entire chamber was built from dark industrial metals, with heavy bolts and thick reinforcement beams on the walls and floor. The chamber was a combination refinery, forge and manufacturing plant, the size of an indoor arena. The high ceiling was blurred with smoke haze and shadow, with the only light source being the glow of molten metal.

Industrial silhouettes loomed in the dark, whether the large machinery or the constructs that operated it. These constructs were larger than normal but not of the combat variety. These were utility machines, purely for servicing the operation that had not stopped even after the flying city fell from the sky.

A few more combat constructs moved to attack Sendira, Fila and Ramona, but there were not that many available. The completed constructs all immediately moved out into the winding network of mostly collapsed tunnels as soon as they were finished. Only a handful of freshly built ones were present, some still glowing with heat from the manufacturing process. The utility machines made no attempt to attack.

The trio didn't act personally, allowing the two gold-rank converted with them to handle the constructs. The essence users could sense the presence of three more gold-rank auras on top of the converted; the clockwork kings they had come looking for. The construct kings were themselves utility constructs that, like the others, did not move to attack. They were somewhere off in the dark, unreactive to the presence of the intruders. Two of the auras were distinct and easy to pinpoint, while the other was diffuse and seemed to fill the room.

Once the gold-rank converted dealt with the combat constructs, Sendira launched a glowing projectile into the air that flared into a bright light just before it would have struck the ceiling. Motes of light burst out, then started drifting around the room, illuminating everything.

They immediately spotted two clockwork kings, having known where to look from their auras. They looked like clockwork skeletons, twice the size of a human, semi-covered in metal panels that only partly covered their internal mechanisms. Everything else in the room, from the walls to the vats of molten steel to the constructs it created, was crude and industrial in design. The clockwork kings, however, were works of art. Their metal panels were lacquered in white and decorated with brass embellishments. The internal mechanisms showing beneath were intricately crafted like the inside of a pocket watch.

Each construct king had four arms, all of which ended in what were similar to hands but with many more fingers, each with many points of articulation. They were too delicate to be designed for fighting, although they would be dangerous to anyone below their rank if put to violent purpose. All the arms were busily assembling devices that looked tiny in the hands of the large kings. The components were being plucked from within the kings' own bodies; delicate pieces that were set together with swift but absolute precision.

"Where's the third one?" Ramona asked, looking around. Now that there was light, she and her companions could see the room clearly.

"There," Fila pointed. The others looked and saw the arms of a construct king, but while they were moving around, they were not attached to the rest of the king but an incongruously crude piece of industrial machinery. They quickly realised that the reason the construct king's aura was so scattered was that so was the king itself; without apparently impairing its function, the king had been disassembled and integrated into the infrastructure of the facility.

"That's good," Sendira said. "We'll take the intact ones and the Adventure Society can destroy the other, happy that they've shut down the production."

"And how are we going to take the intact ones?" Fila asked. "They're docile now, but will they come quietly?"

"They will," Sendira told her. "When the Builder cult delivered the first construct king to us, they also delivered a device to control it. It was tailored to that king only, but at the same time we purified the king, we purified the device. Now we control all its functions and simply turned the restriction off."

"That's good," Ramona said. "We should move swiftly, then."

"Agreed," Sendira said. "I will..."

Sendira trailed off as the pervasive aura from the beacon they activated was cut off. It had been drenching the island, even into the subterranean depths, but suddenly it vanished.

"You said that they wouldn't be able to turn it off," Ramona accused Sendira.

“They couldn’t,” Sendira told her. For the first time since arriving on the island, she showed an expression of uncertainty. “Even if they did find a way to shut it off, the aura would have diminished slowly. And if they’d destroyed the beacon we would have felt an aura pulse that would have broken the minds of anyone too close to it. It shouldn’t be possible to just cut the aura off like that.”

“Maybe they portalled the beacon away,” Fila suggested.

“Portals won’t work even remotely close to the beacon, let alone right on top of it.”

“A storage space?” Ramona asked. “Could they stow the beacon away?”

“Perhaps,” Sendira said. “That won’t work for long, though. The beacon will swiftly destroy any kind of dimensional bag they put it in and be excreted from the dimensional space as it breaks down. As for a storage space coming from someone’s abilities, the beacon will have very bad effects on anyone who tries that. It might even kill them if they don’t take it back out.”

Sendira nodded to Ramona.

“I believe you are correct. Either it’s in a storage space or a dimensional bag, which is the only explanation for the aura just vanishing. It’s unsustainable, however, so the beacon will be active again soon. Until it is, however, our actions will be exposed. The gold-rank adventurers will have sensed our auras and know our location. We need to move quickly.”

“Are you sure the beacon will come back?” Fila asked. “Escaping the island won’t be easy without the cover of the beacon.”

“Of course it will,” Sendira said. “Anything capable of containing that beacon would have to possess inconceivable power.”