

Chapter 531

You Don't Have it in You

With his team needing to assemble for a contract mid-morning, Jason set out early to conduct his own affairs. He portalled to Livaros, arriving in one of the squares marked as legal teleport destinations. Another person followed him through before he closed the portal. She left immediately with no more than a nod to Jason, moving quickly. He set out at a more sedate pace making his way through the streets at a leisurely meander. His destination was Sensual Attire For the Sensual Gentleman, the tailor shop owned by Alejandro Albericci.

Jason had ordered his new wardrobe some time ago but events had engulfed the whole city and Jason in particular. He was a long way from the only one affected by service delays and he didn't begrudge the wait. There were plenty of people in desperate need, making Jason's desire for tropics-appropriate casual wear a low priority.

There was a wariness with which Jason made his way towards the tailor shop. He had already known for some time that Alejandro had closed the shop to provide support services to the city's relief logistics efforts. It had come as something of a surprise, then, to receive a message informing him that his new wardrobe was ready for collection.

Wary of political machinations or worse, Jason had recruited someone to help feel the place out. While he could certainly have blanketed the area in his aura, he wasn't looking to make a spectacle. Instead, he called on someone whose senses were even stronger than his own but operated with more finesse than Jason himself.

After arriving through Jason's portal, Estella Warnock had gone off without a word to scout the route to the tailor shop. She had made a career out of being a spy and urban scout in Livaros and knew the island extremely well. Not just the streets but the back alleys, rooftops and building interiors. Between her stealth and disguise powers, she had been inside all but the most secure buildings on the island, and even a few of those.

Livaros was an island of adventurers and aristocrats; one of the centres of global civilisation. Wealth and power had seeped into the streets and buildings over the centuries, which only the ignorant considered a metaphor. Even the essences and awakening stones that manifested on the island trended towards higher-rarity.

All the influence and power made Livaros an incredibly safe place, for a given value of safe. Violence was effectively absent but, in Livaros, war was not a matter of violence. In the upper echelons of society, along with those they used and those who used them,

politics was the battlefield and information the weapon. To know the needs, desires and fears of a rival was to have a power over them as great as any essence ability.

Estella had thrived in this environment for a number of reasons. Her power set was an obvious part of that, allowing her to vanish into shadows or hide in plain sight. More important was her ability to temper her ambition. She never took the big risk for the big score, sticking to what she knew and what she was certain about accomplishing. To play the information game in Livaros was dangerous and she never gambled, knowing that sooner or later, the dice would not go her way.

This was what led to her falling out with Havi Estos. She had done work for the well-known middleman since shortly after reaching iron-rank. She was of little use at that stage but the potential of her four auras was obvious. Rather than wait for her power to come to fruition, Havi played the long game and invested in her early. Estella had known the reasoning behind his generosity but hadn't minded. He never hid his intentions or sought to exploit her, being upfront with his intentions and always dealing straight.

Her time at bronze rank was the strongest point in their relationship. She had become much more useful to him as experience led to growth in power and expertise. She was often useful to spy on silver-rankers but Havi never pushed her limits, recognising that, as a bronze ranker, she still needed to be cautious. She avoided the more powerful silver-rankers, only spying on those closer to the start of the rank than the end.

It was after she reached silver rank that things started to go sour. Havi wanted to push her into bolder and bolder moves, but while she had grown in power, Livaros was no simple place. While there was no shortage of hopeless aristocrats at silver rank, it was also home to people significantly more dangerous. Rimaros was the pinnacle of the adventuring world and no adventurer of note was ordinary. Even those that seemed normal had methods that set them apart, meaning that to spy on or investigate them was a fraught endeavour.

More than once, Havi sent her to look into the kind of people that she had no business provoking. These were the kinds of people that could make someone like her disappear, even with her grandfather's influence. The gold-ranker had largely retired and had never been a man of exceptional power or influence.

Much like his granddaughter in her profession, Warwick Warnock had always taken a safe and reliable path in his adventuring. It had meant that silver and gold rank had taken him longer than most adventurers, but many more died trying while he climbed the mountain one step at a time. His avoidance of politics meant that while he had the prestige of any gold-ranker, it was no more than that. With Havi pushing Estella towards ever-more-

dangerous enemies, one relatively unheard-of gold ranker was not enough to ensure her safety if things went wrong.

While she didn't regret cutting ties with Havi, it left Estella at something of a loss. While he wasn't the only person she worked for, he was the spider in the middle of the web that was the Livaros underworld. It was a very different kind of underbelly than most cities, requiring a very different approach. Havi wouldn't make things difficult for her, but being on the outs with him made other clients wary. The jobs she was offered swiftly declined both in number and remuneration.

Unsure of what to do, she had finally approached her grandfather, not for help but advice and guidance. The death of her adventurer parents had prompted his retirement to raise her and he had never pushed her to follow in his footsteps, the way he had with his son. Events overcame them, however, as Warwick stepped up in the Storm Kingdom's hour of need. He went north for the grand battle and never returned.

At a loss, she had moved back into her childhood home, the house on Arnote she inherited from her grandfather. She had no friends and few acquaintances, all of which were on Livaros and most of which were avoiding her because of their own need to deal with Havi Estos.

She only really had two acquaintances now, one of which was the mayor of her new home. Pelli was some kind of peripheral royalty who had roped her into helping protect the island, mostly through her grandfather's influence. Estella didn't care about the royal family, being an adventurer or helping people. What she did care about was her grandfather, so when he asked, she agreed.

The other acquaintance was her neighbour, the last person Havi had her investigate. They nodded to one another in passing and had spoken a few times. Asano hadn't known her grandfather long but they had gotten along very well.

When Asano engaged her in a professional capacity, she had no reason to refuse. It was the kind of simple job she had done countless times, watching out for some kind of setup to try and push a political agenda, gather information or gather dirt. It had been a little while so she took her time, being careful and thorough before reporting the all-clear to Asano.

Estella had found Jason and let him know that everything was as it appeared to be, so far as she could determine.

"Thank you," he told her. "Would you like me to portal you home?"

“I’ll stick with you,” she said. “Sometimes a capable schemer will be cautious and wait until someone like me is done before making a move.”

“I appreciate your work ethic,” Jason told her.

They arrived at the front door of Sensual Attire For the Sensual Gentleman where the door was immediately opened by Alejandro Albericci who graciously ushered them inside. The celestine tailor had his sea-green hair tied up in a top knot and his suit was quite dark. This stood out to Jason as he had learned that the tailor very much preferred to operate in lighter tones.

“Thank you for coming, Mr Asano. And, if I’m not mistaken, you are miss Estella Warnock?”

“That’s right,” Estella said.

“Then please allow me to convey my condolences on the passing of your grandfather. He was a man who knew how to find simple satisfaction in a world full of people ever hungry and never satisfied. I admired him a great deal.”

“You knew my grandfather?”

“He was a customer of mine, of my uncle before me and my great uncle before that. I would not go so far as to claim a friendship, but his was a welcome acquaintance to make. If I may ask, young Miss, what brings you to my door today.”

“After my last visit,” Jason said, “I was wary of someone else trying to set up an oh-so-coincidental encounter. I have engaged Miss Warnock to forewarn me.”

“Her reputation in this field is exemplary, so I compliment you on your choice.”

“I was a little surprised to hear from you, Mr Albericci,” Jason said.

“Please, Mr Asano, do call me Al.”

“Alright, Al. I didn’t realise you were still operating.”

“I am not taking new clients,” Alejandro said. “Livaros, for all the turmoil and the terrifying attack, went largely untouched by the recent trouble. Amongst the civilian population and infrastructure, anyway. The adventurers have been tragically devastated and again, Miss Warnock, my heartfelt commiseration for your loss. But given that, I have had at least some time and have been working on my existing commissions. They are being completed later than I would like but completed nonetheless.”

Alejandro had an assistant brew Estella a cup of tea while he took Jason into the workroom for final fitting and adjustments he could make swiftly using his essence abilities.

“For your outfits, I decided to take inspiration from you,” Alejandro explained as he wheeled a mobile rack from a storage room. “You asked for clothes well suited in both function and style to the Sea of Storms and that is where I started. Storm linen, cloud silk,

tidal cotton. Flexible, comfortable, breathable and resistant to the elements, along with the usual enchantments. Plus, a selection of hats as requested.”

Alejandro waved a hand in the direction of Jason's face.

“Your eyes, as I'm sure you're aware, are very striking. When designing your clothes, I had the choice between minimising their impact to avoid clashing or to emphasise them for effect. Naturally, I chose emphasis, since why make a coward's choice for a man of courage and prestige.”

“I'm not that prestigious,” Jason assured him. “I don't know what you've heard but I know some prestigious people; I'm not one of them. If that's the reason you took the time to finish my commission, I'm afraid you'll be disappointed.”

“I meet a lot of powerful people in my profession, Mr Asano. You would be startled by how much I learn from what clothes they walk in here with and what clothes they want to walk out with. I know what a man who clings to the prestige of others looks like, as well as a man who wishes he had none. If I may be so bold, Mr Asano, you think you want to be like Miss Warnock's grandfather but you never will be. You don't have it in you.”

“Is that so?”

“It is, which is why I went ahead and used your remarkable ocular presence as the basis for the emphasis notes in your outfits. Nothing outrageous; your outfits are all in the colours, cuts and fabrics we discussed. I have provided, however, an extensive array of accessories, from cufflinks to handkerchiefs plus hatbands that will draw out the vibrant colours of your eyes.”

“I'm not looking for flashy, Mr... Al.”

“I am well aware, Mr Asano. As I take you through the outfits, what you will see is dignity and style but with just the right amount of pop. Naturally, should you wish to be less overt, there is a selection of more conservative options as well, although I personally hope they go in a draw and never come out.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “I guess you should start taking me through what you've done and we'll see.”

“I'm very confident, Mr Asano. And, of course, I have made sure the speciality outfits you requested are all here. Let's start with something simple, however...”

Chapter 532

Good Luck Fighting Evil

The other members of Jason's team were conducting their own affairs prior to meeting up for their new contract. Neil went to church. Humphrey and Sophie followed Belinda to browse for items at the trade hall as Belinda's powers had become increasingly item-dependent at silver rank. Livaros was often an expensive market but had no shortage of quality goods.

Clive went with Farrah to look in on Travis, who had been holed up in the Magic Society ever since his development of the weapon that felled the Builder city. They were making sure that he wasn't being subjected to the same exploitation that Clive had been put through when he was bronze rank.

The team met up at the Adventure Society campus, Jason arriving in one of his new outfits. This one was specifically designed for smart-casual adventuring, with a very pale blue suit, white shirt and a Panama-style hat. His shoes, pocket square and hatband all had flares of bolder blue with touches of orange, mirrored in his eyes.

"It's too much," Neil said.

"Says the man who dressed like his great aunt until Jason came along," Belinda said.

"I like it," Humphrey said. "I wish I could wear a cut like that. I don't have the body shape."

"Yeah," Jason said, looking at Humphrey and his Middle-Eastern Superman appearance. "You're really hard up."

They walked across the busy campus grounds until they came to the marshalling yard where they needed to assemble for the contract. There were many of these gathering spots and this one was mostly surrounded by lawn except for the building on one side. They were not the first group to arrive and they wouldn't be the last as they were one of six teams assigned to the expedition. The groups already present were shrouded by privacy screens, which was the norm. High-rankers had sensitive enough hearing that it was harder not to eavesdrop, so privacy screens were commonplace in Livaros. As with restraining auras, in a place where essence users gathered, like the Adventure Society campus, to not use them was considered rude. Only when silver-rankers were rare, as with the campus in Greenstone, were privacy screens largely unheard of.

Jason's team likewise used their own screen, Humphrey having activated the high-quality device that he carried.

“It’s strange that they’re putting so many teams on this,” Humphrey said, looking around at the groups that arrived before them. “With the Adventure Society shorthanded, it seems a strange time to assign this many people to explore the fallen Builder cities. Surely that can wait until after the monster surge.”

“My guess would be they’re worried about something buried inside these cities,” Jason said. “It’s possible that some kind of threat survived the destruction and is waiting to pop out and wreak havoc.”

“What kind of threat?” Neil asked.

“Remember the Order of the Reaper’s astral space?” Clive asked. “How it turned out to have originally belonged to the Builder and been a city-shaped dimensional vessel designed for invasion? Sound like anything you’ve seen recently?”

“You’re saying it was like the cities that attacked Rimaros?” Humphrey asked.

“Actually, it was larger,” Clive said. “You remember how big that place was. If you think of all these cities appearing like a fleet of ships, I think what we saw was a flagship. It had a dozen of those world engineers; diamond-rank golems larger than most buildings. After what happened here, it gives a sense of what would have happened if we hadn’t stopped it. The Builder would have started his invasion three years early.”

“But we did stop it,” Neil said. “I mean, it was mostly you, Clive, but the rest of us were there and we need to tell people about that. Female people.”

“Neil,” Jason said, “you’re a silver-rank, elven adventurer who’s about sixty percent abdominal muscle. If you’re having trouble attracting women then your flirting techniques must be catastrophically bad. It’s not that hard. Keep your mouth closed, your shirt open and give it about one minute.”

“My flirting technique is just fine, thank you very much.”

The team all looked at him.

“What?” he asked.

Jason turned his gaze to a closed door in the nearby building.

“I’m going to go talk to Liara,” he told the others and headed in that direction, the invisible privacy screen making a faint hum as he left its coverage. As he drew close to the building, Princess Liara emerged through the door. The other teams present noted her appearance but Jason was the only one to approach. Liara tapped a brooch on her chest and an invisible privacy screen shrouded them. Unlike most, this one had a visible distortion effect.

“You noticed me,” she said to Jason.

“You let me,” he said. “You’re not that sloppy.”

A smile teased at her lips.

"I saw you talking about world engineers."

"Eavesdropper. I thought Humphrey's privacy screen was pretty good."

"I read your lips."

"Through a wall?"

"Yes."

"That's a little impressive, I guess."

"Most people use invisible privacy screens so as to stand out less. They aren't as secure as people think, which your new friend Estella could tell all about."

"Are you keeping tabs on me, Princess?"

"Only to a degree. I can't spare the kind of people who can follow you without you noticing. That quite aggravated Vesper, by the way."

They shared a sad smile.

"I see you finally got that wardrobe change she wanted," Liara said.

"Do you think she'd like it?"

"I do. She liked men in hats."

Liara looked over at Jason's team. Like the groups in the marshalling yard, they were watching Liara and Jason talk within the shimmering screen.

"You were right about why resources are being allocated to exploring the Builder city," Liara said. "This expedition is going to the fallen city here while a branch further north is exploring the sunken city. The Sea of Storms has no shortage of adventurers specialised in underwater operations."

"The advantage of an adventuring culture built around specialisation," Jason acknowledged. "Always having the right people for the job. What about the city Dawn eliminated?"

"She was too thorough to warrant an operation," Liara said. "We did have it checked out but it was fast. The whole area of desert is just glass now. The Magic Society is already putting up proposals for possible uses for the area."

"No world engineers hiding away, then."

"I was a little surprised to see your group mention world engineers."

"Really? Hearing that from us shouldn't be a surprise to someone who took a rummage through my file. Did you just skim read? You were slacking off, weren't you?"

"I was not slacking off," she said with an insincere glare as Jason chuckled.

"Did some giant golem show up somewhere?" he asked. "Maybe pop out of a city that had supposedly been destroyed?"

Liara nodded.

"That's exactly what happened," she confirmed. "There was a Builder city, less powerful than the ones here because it was in a lower magic zone. The local adventurers took it down but days later, three of world engineers emerged from the ruins."

"Can diamond-rank golems even operate in a zone with lower magic?"

"It turns out that world engineers get their name from their impact on the world around them. The three of them together operated like a giant mana accumulator, drawing in, refining and redispersing the ambient magic to raise the local magical density. It only works because of the heightened magical saturation from the monster surge."

"Meaning that they're built specifically to operate when invading worlds," Jason said. "The Builder sucks so much. So, their purpose is to prime a lower-magic area for attack from the Builder's stronger forces?"

"It would seem so. We know that it has yet to deploy its full forces, as demonstrated by the city that appeared to attack Rimaros."

"It must be a limited reserve, though, or he'd drop half a dozen of the things to make sure."

"Small mercies," Liara said. "We don't think that the cities brought down here have world engineers because they seem specialised for lower magic zones but we want to make sure we don't get any other surprises. We've confirmed that there are lingering Builder constructs in the ruin of the city, so there's a reasonable chance of something truly dangerous still being in there. Your friend's weapon was detonated in the depths of the city, though, so we're hoping it dealt with any hidden dangers buried deep in the ruins."

Even Jason's powerful senses couldn't read the emotions of gold-rank stealth specialist Liara, but her face revealed the anguish her aura did not.

"I'm sorry about Vesper," Jason said softly. "She died as well as anyone could ask for. I liked her."

"I'm sure," Liara said with a sad smile.

"No, really," Jason said. "I'll take smart and sharp over nice and boring every day of the week."

"She liked you too."

"She hated me."

"That was somewhat the same thing with Vesper; she liked a fight. It was the unremarkable she couldn't stand."

"That's pretty elitist."

"You essentially just said the same thing," Liara told him.

“Yeah, but I said it with charm.”

She gave him a flat look.

“No?” he asked.

“No.”

“I thought I was being charming.”

“Most men do, in my experience.”

Jason let out another chuckle as he looked around the marshalling yard.

“I should probably get back to my team. People are seeing us get chummy and I wouldn’t want them thinking I’m the teacher’s pet. At some point, we should talk about getting me in a room with the Purity prisoners, though.”

“They’re important prisoners, Mr Asano, not a festival attraction. I told you from the beginning that I will only use you if I think we can get something useful out of it.”

“Princess, I saw the results of whatever Purity is up to.”

“That does not make it your responsibility to resolve. You don’t have to be the one to solve every problem, Mr Asano.”

Jason blinked, slightly taken aback.

“I don’t, do I?” he realised. “That’s actually nice to hear. Really nice to hear. Um, good luck fighting evil, then. I’m going to go back to my team.”

“You do realise you’re here because we’re about to explore the ruins of a crashed flying city that is now an island full of ruins filled with constructs sent by an interdimensional invader against whom you specifically are best-suited to combat. An interdimensional invader that hates you personally and specifically.”

"That's quite a mouthful. At this point in my life, I save time and call that kind of thing a Tuesday."

“What’s a Tuesday?”

The island that was once a flying city sat close to the shores of Rimaros. It had already impacted shipping not just with its presence but its impact on water currents around the island. The surface of the city was relatively intact, despite having fallen from the sky after having a magical version of a nuclear weapon detonate deep within it. Relatively intact was not the same as fully intact, however, and there was no mistaking it for an ordinary ruined city.

As the group flew over the water towards it, the first thing they saw was that the flying city had not fallen into the water flat. It was laying at about a twenty-degree angle, putting

all the buildings on a lean. Some had collapsed from a combination of this treatment and battle damage yet most remained standing, even those that were quite tall.

Each group had their own means to move across the water. Most moved individually on personal transport, like conjured clouds or construct creatures. Jason's team weren't using a Shade vehicle but were instead all inside Clive's rune tortoise familiar, Onslow, as it flew through the air. As of silver rank, Onslow was able to expand his shell to the size of a room. It had no sides, the top and bottom portions of the shell completely separated. The top half of the shell was suspended over the bottom, held in place by magical winds that shrouded the shells and prevented air from rushing into the interior as they flew about. It even kept the inside pleasantly cool under the tropical sun.

As for Onslow himself, he oddly shrank as his shell expanded, taking on a more humanoid form until he looked like a child in the world's best ninja turtle cosplay. His head was much the same, while his front feet were now three-fingered hands. His shell was no longer on his body and Clive had purchased some children's clothes that he was now wearing. As Onslow's shell flew across the water with Jason and the team in it, the familiar happily sat sharing a large salad bowl with Clive.

"This is awesome," Jason said. "It's like being in a bioship."

"This is a more secure vessel than what I can produce," Shade said. "It has much greater structural integrity. Can Onslow access his elemental shell powers in this state?"

Onslow made a chirping noise, his mouth stuffed full of lettuce.

"Is that what a tortoise normally sounds like?" Jason asked.

"Does it matter?" Sophie asked, scratching Onslow behind the head. "He's a good boy, isn't he?"

Onslow happily chirped the affirmative.

"He can use his abilities," Clive said. "This is his only available form, though, and while the speed is adequate for short distances, it's not ideal for long-distance travel. He can keep up with airships that are slowing themselves down to avoid monster attention during a surge but that's his limit. Also, no furniture."

That aspect left the group either sitting on the warm, soft, leathery floor or standing, looking out at their destination. Fortunately, the floor was quite comfortable, although Jason was sitting in a cloud chair. As they drew closer to their destination the team all got up to watch the city grow larger in their vision as they approached.

Chapter 533

Special Boy

Jason's team arrived with the others on the shore of the island that had once been a flying city. The city was severely damaged, with cracked streets and buildings in various states of repair. Even more noticeable was the cant of the city, which had fallen on a lean of around twenty degrees. The result was a feeling of alienness, like staring at an optical illusion for too long.

The expedition had two gold rankers. Liara Rimaros was in charge, with Jana Costi as her second. Jana was a member of Liara's team from her pre-gold days and Jason had met her briefly. She looked very different now, which he knew was due to the absence of her brother. Ledev Costi had sacrificed himself in the bowels of the city in which they now stood. Jana's aura revealed nothing, even to Jason, but her face was filled with barely restrained anger as she listened to Liara brief the expedition.

"We've been over everything before, so I'll just quickly recap," Liara announced. "We know there are active construct creatures on the island and we believe there is a factory producing them somewhere in or below the city. Our primary goal is to discover and shut down this factory, along with any other threats we might find. We will be splitting up into individual teams but remain in contact through a communication power."

Liara gestured to Jason.

"Mr Asano will explain the functions of his ability shortly, but the key point is that you are to ask for assistance when encountering anything unexpected. Anything. I don't care how easy it seems to handle. I intend to walk away from this expedition with zero casualties. This damn place has taken too damn many of us already and I won't let it take any more."

Before setting out, Liara had already explained that a gold-rank team had already come to the island and cleared out all the construct creatures they found. As far as anyone monitoring the site could tell, whatever was producing more of the constructs was limited to silver-rank creations. The gold-rank constructs already eliminated should have been the last, but should was not a word to rely on.

"We are anticipating one or more clockwork kings to be present in the factory," Liara said. "They are not combat-oriented but no gold-rank enemy should be underestimated. Under no circumstances whatsoever is any team to enter any location they suspect to be the factory alone. The expedition will regroup and move together."

The teams split up and moved out while staying relatively close, with the gold rankers vanishing into stealth. Jason was able to keep track of their location via his map ability since they were connected to him through his party interface ability. As the teams were all silver rank, close wasn't all that close given the speeds at which they could move to reinforce one another.

"This is nostalgic," Jason said as his team moved out. "All of us back together, roaming through the ruins of a weird magic city."

"How about you don't die this time," Neil said.

"Neil, you're such a sweetie," Jason said.

"I just don't want to go back to mediocre food."

"Oh, I've embarrassed him now."

"Shut up," Neil muttered, refusing to meet anyone's gaze as the rest of the team laughed.

"Alright, get your heads into a fight space," Humphrey ordered. "We've been told the constructs have been congregating mostly in the central areas but keep an eye out for surprises. Jason, you're our stealth scout so you move out ahead. Sophie, you're our speed scout so you take the rear and flanks. Neil, you're our healer so try not to get stabbed."

"I'll be fine, thank you," Neil said as Sophie moved off in a blur and Jason vanished into the shadows.

"Belinda, keep an eye on Neil," Humphrey said. "Make sure he doesn't get stabbed."

"I'm not going to get stabbed!"

"Don't worry, Neil," Belinda told him. "Third priority. Number two is keeping the snacks safe."

"Very funny," Neil said. "Also, doesn't Jason have the snacks?"

"Scout is a dangerous position," Belinda explained. "I've got the backup snacks."

"I'm not feeling deeply valued," Neil said.

"Fine," Belinda complained. "I'll prioritise you over the backup snacks. What did you even put in that box anyway, Jason?"

"Cake sandwiches," Jason answered through team chat.

"As team leader," Humphrey said, "I'm going to have to overrule you, Belinda. If it's cake sandwiches, you absolutely must prioritise them over stopping Neil from getting stabbed. He has to take some responsibility for himself."

"You all realise that a lot of teams are looking for a good healer, right?" Neil asked. "Why don't you ever talk about Clive getting stabbed?"

“Who would stab Clive?” Sophie asked through team chat. “Everyone loves Clive.”

“Yeah.”

“Agreed.”

“Definitely.”

“Except his wife.”

“Dammit, Jason!”

A construct creature shaped like a two-headed, four-armed ogre, was standing in front of Humphrey, twice the adventurer’s height. It brought four clubs down towards his head but Humphrey didn’t even raise his sword to block. Clive was already casting a spell before the monster started swinging its weapons.

Ability: [Instant Karma] (Karma)

- Spell (spell, affliction, retribution, holy).
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Silver 2 (69%).

- Effect (iron): The target suffers damage of an amount and type identical to all damage inflicted by the target in the last few moments. This is considered retributive damage. Reducing or negating the original damage does not reduce or negate the retributive damage.

- Effect (bronze): You gain an alternative variant of the base spell. The variant spell operates identically to the iron-rank effect except that it changes the damage type of the retributive damage. The new damage type is based on the original, such as heat becoming cold or disruptive-force becoming resonating-force. Transcendent damage cannot be affected by this version of the spell.

- Effect (silver): You gain a pair of additional spells. Each spell inflicts a different version of the short-lived holy affliction [Instant Karma]. An individual may only be subjected to one version of [Instant Karma] at a time but the instantaneous spells from the iron and bronze ranks of this ability can be used on individuals suffering the affliction.

- [Instant Karma] (affliction, retribution, holy): When the target of this ability deals damage they suffer equivalent retributive damage. The damage type of the retributive effect depends on the spell variant used to generate the affliction. Available damage variants: identical to original damage; alternate damage based on original damage type.

When Clive first joined the team, his skills had not been up to the standards of Humphrey, Jason or Neil. Even Sophie quickly outpaced him, her long history of violence

helping her adapt very well to the adventuring life. Clive's combat training had been long ago and all but unused for a decade after he gave up adventuring for research.

The last time the team had spent time in a ruined city, honing their skills, it had been Clive and Belinda who had the furthest to go. Both preferred studying magic over methods of killing, although both brought their innovative minds to the more aggressive applications of their power sets.

Clive and Belinda were best at tricky, preparation-based tactics, but that was not the extent of their repertoires. It had been years since Jason pushed Clive back into the adventuring life and he had not been idle with improving himself, becoming more proficient with what, for Clive, passed as simple abilities. While the powers themselves were complex, their use was all about using quick judgement and quick reflexes to seize the moment.

Instant Karma was a power of Clive's that exemplified this. It had long been the power most difficult for him to raise as he was simply bad at using it. Back when Jason had still been with them, it was a power the team had to make a concerted effort to let him practise. In the time between Jason's departure and return, Clive's dedication to self-improvement and years of adventuring experience had made a stark difference. Now, Instant karma was one of Clive's most-used powers and he was always on the lookout for the chance to use it to best effect.

Clive's power was not the only one set off in the fleeting moment of the construct swinging its weapons. Humphrey didn't block the attack because he trusted Neil to intervene and, as predicted, a bubble shield appeared around him as the clubs hammered down.

Ability: [Burst Shield] (Shield)

- Special ability (recovery, retribution, magic, curse).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 20 seconds.

- Current rank: Silver 2 (61%).

- Effect (iron): Create a short-lived shield that negates an incoming attack and explodes out, knocking back nearby enemies and inflicting concussive damage. High-damage attacks of silver-rank or higher may not be entirely negated.
- Effect (bronze): Inflicts [Vibrant Echo] on anyone damaged by the blast.
- Effect (silver): Inflicts [Slow Learner] on anyone damaged by the blast.

- [Vibrant Echo] (affliction, damage-over-time, magic, stacking): Inflicts ongoing resonating-force damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 - [Slow Learner] (affliction, curse): Increases all retributive damage suffered by the target.
-

The shield exploded, blasting away the giant construct. The boost Neil's shield gave to any retribution damage made Clive effect all the more powerful, and that was not the only such power Clive's Karma essence possessed.

Ability: [Mantle of Retribution] (Karmic)

- Spell (boon, retributive).
 - Cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: 10 seconds.

 - Current rank: Silver 1 (96%).

 - Effect (iron): Inflicts retributive impact damage on anyone who attacks the target ally.

 - Effect (bronze): Increasing the cost to moderate mana allows the mantle of retribution to be bestowed on all nearby allies.

 - Effect (silver): For a brief period after being attacked, all damage inflicted by the mantle recipient against the entity or object that damaged them is increased.
-

From the very beginning, Jason's afflictions had been Plan A of the team's strategy against enemies that had small numbers and high individual power. They had never been foolish enough to make it their only plan, however, and they had numerous strategies for such fights. This had proven very important after Jason was lost to them.

One of the key strategies that the team used as their rank increased had started as a supplement to plan Let Jason Do The Damage. They would load up Humphrey and Sophie with protection and enhancement powers and let them switch off against the opponent. With their powers reaching silver rank, that had become a powerful strategy in its own right, which was valuable given that Jason was no longer with them. Using the synergistic retribution damage that Neil and Clive could place on the team and Sophie could place on herself, they made attacking the team's frontline as unpleasant as being attacked by it.

With the construct thrown backwards by the concussive blast of Neil's shield, Humphrey was leaping through the air after it before it had time to land. He brought down

his massive sword with practised timing, the weapon smashing into the construct just as the construct smashed into the ground.

Humphrey had tailored his equipment towards extending the time he could fight rather than brief, destructive bursts, like Farrah. Even so, the natural inclination of his power set was dealing a large amount of damage in a small amount of time. While his gear had limited support for this, his abilities did plenty of work on their own. Not only was he stacking multiple passive and active abilities into the attack but also using his doubly-evolved racial gift.

Ability: [Hero's Sacrifice]

- Transfigured from evolved ability [Attack of the Mirage Dragon].
- Previous effects of racial ability [Attack of the Mirage Dragon] have been lost.
- Sacrifice your health to enhance the power of your special attacks.

At bronze-rank, the power had been a significant step down from the ability it replaced. Humphrey's disappointment had disappeared on reaching silver rank. A bronze-ranker had more life force than a normal person but while the difference was large, it wasn't overwhelming. Making any noticeable sacrifice of that life force was both limited in scope and dangerous in application.

A silver-ranker, by comparison, was a towering titan of life force; a bonfire compared to a match. Humphrey could pour life-force into his attack to generate a massive amount of damage. Best of all, the ability enhanced whatever damage type Humphrey happened to be using.

Ability: [Shield Breaker] (Might)

- Special attack.
- Cost: Low mana, moderate stamina.
- Cooldown: 10 seconds.
- Current rank: Silver 2 (79%).
- Effect (iron): Inflicts additional resonating-force damage, highly effective against physical defences. Requires a heavy weapon.
- Effect (bronze): Damage to rigid material is significantly increased.
- Effect (silver): Inflicts [Vibrant Echo] on anyone damaged by the attack.

- [Vibrant Echo] (affliction, damage-over-time, magic, stacking): Inflicts ongoing resonating-force damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

It was an attack based entirely around resonating-force damage, making it purpose-built for breaking through armour. Builder constructs didn't just have armour; they essentially were armour, making the power all the more effective. Humphrey's attack went off like a shaped charge; an explosion efficiently directing its force exactly where it needed to go.

Even having hitting it so hard it left an indent the shape of its body in the ground like a cartoon character, the construct wasn't finished. Despite all the stacked powers and effects, the idea of a single blow taking down a silver-rank anything was pure fantasy. But silver was truly the first step of leaving mortal frailty behind. Humphrey was well aware of this, not pausing for a moment as he stood over the construct he had half-buried in the shattered flagstones of the street. He brought his weapon up and down, up and down; methodical as a railroad linesman. The construct, despite being artificial and not flesh and blood, was so staggered by Humphrey's initial blow that it lay there and took it, not given a chance to pull itself out of the indent it had made in the street.

Ability: [Relentless Assault] (Might)

- Special attack (magic, dispel).
 - Cost: Low stamina, increasing with each successive attack.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Silver 2 (08%).

 - Effect (iron): Each use of this attack in quick succession increases the damage of this attack. Damage is of the same type caused by a normal attack.

 - Effect (bronze): After a threshold of successive attacks is reached, escalating resonating-force damage is dealt with each attack.

 - Effect (silver): After a threshold of successive attacks is reached, escalating disruptive-force damage is dealt with each attack and one instance of a boon is dispelled from the target. Subsequent attacks dispel an escalating number of instances.
-

Relentless Assault was an ability that had been of little use at lower ranks, with most enemies falling to Humphrey's destructive power very quickly. At silver rank it showed its value, letting him topple giants like a woodsman felling trees. The cost of the ability escalated drastically if he used it for long enough but that was where Humphrey's choice to build his gear for endurance proved itself. He could continue to hack away while his

items and the abilities of his team continually replenished him when the cost of maintaining the attack would otherwise be exhausting.

As Humphrey hacked away, Sophie had tied up the other large construct and Jason's afflictions were now eating away at it. Neil was drawing out a ritual circle in golden light, ready to heal Humphrey who had burned through a good amount of life force.

Ability: [Grand Renewal] (Renewal)

- Spell (healing, ritual).
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: 1 hour.

- Current rank: Silver 2 (38%).

- Effect (iron): Conduct a powerful healing ritual that cleanses all non-wound afflictions. This ability takes the place of the ritual's material components.

- Effect (bronze): The ritual circle is magically drawn, allowing the ritual to be more quickly enacted and in less ideal conditions.

- Effect (silver): Multiple people can be healed in a single ritual, splitting the healing strength between them. The healing provided by this ability has a greater than normal effect at eliminating wound afflictions.

Neil's strongest single-target healing power was a ritual-fuelled ability that was difficult to use in combat, but just the thing for restoring Humphrey's expended life force. Neil wasted no time, knowing that the team needed to be ready should something else turn up to attack them.

"We need more to show up," Belinda complained. "All I got to do this fight was stand here and make sure no one stabbed Neil."

"Yeah," Belinda agreed, scratching at her moustache.

The team only took a short break in the wake of the fight. Humphrey, fresh from being healed up, flew to where Jason was standing atop a half-ruined tower, watching the approaches to their resting spot.

"You look troubled," Humphrey said. "Surely a few constructs don't bother you."

"That's the problem," Jason said. "It feels like the Builder is iterating his construct designs to counter my ability to affect them. Back in Greenstone, I was able to lock down star seeds so that, even without my intervention, they'd stay locked long enough for the Magic Society to work up something to keep them suppressed."

"It's not the same now?"

“No. The cultists I encountered not long before you and the team arrived were much harder to keep bundled up. It was like holding a smooth, greased-up stone; it could easily have slipped out of my grip. The constructs at that time were easy enough to make clumsy, but the ones here were more resistant.”

“You think the Builder is changing them to stop you?”

“I think he's updating his minions each time he sees me affect them, yeah. It's probably not hard. For the star seeds it would be like a firmware update.”

“A what?”

“Sorry. I mean that Builder can change them easily and remotely. My guess would be that it's harder with the constructs since the cultists have star seeds with direct connections to the Builder. He probably can't change the constructs that have been already built, but most likely we're dealing with newly-crafted ones here. I imagine he updates the designs through those clockwork kings.”

“Just to be clear, then,” Humphrey said, “You're up here brooding because you're worried you won't be the special boy who can single-handedly take on whole armies of Builder constructs?”

“Not exactly,” Jason said. “I could probably take on an army of them with just my regular powers if I'm being honest.”

Humphrey gave Jason a flat look and opened the voice chat to the team.

“I've made a decision as team leader,” he announced. “We are now letting Jason get stabbed.”

“Oh, come on,” Jason complained. “That's hardly—”

Humphrey grabbed the front of Jason's combat robes and threw him off the tower.

Chapter 534

Strictly Necessary

"There's something odd about this city," Humphrey said, prompting the rest of the team give him a confused look. Even Sophie stuck her head over the roof she was standing on to look his way.

"Um, yes," Clive said. "I may have spotted the occasional eccentricity of civil construction myself."

"Just to be clear," Neil said, "you think there might be something odd about the city that is really a giant dimension-hopping ship that fell out of the sky, is tilted at an angle, smashed all to crap and host to an ever-growing army of automatons attempting to pluck whole chunks off the side of the world."

"I think you might be onto something there, Hump," Jason said.

"You're looking, but not seeing," Humphrey told them. "Listen to what Neil described. What you see is all the strangeness that Neil mentioned but that isn't actually strange. That's exactly what you'd expect from a crashed interdimensional invasion ship and that's how you're all looking at this place. But try looking at it as a city. A ruined, tilted city, but a city."

Jason emerged from a nearby shadow, his expression curious as Humphrey piqued his interest.

"What are you seeing that the rest of us aren't?" Jason asked him.

"It was something that occurred to me when we were fighting here during the battle," Humphrey said. "Back then it was too hectic to give any real thought to."

"Compared to this trip which has been nice and relaxed," Neil pointed out.

"I've been to a lot of cities across the world," Humphrey said. "I was raised in Greenstone but my mother has been travelling with my sister and me since we were small. She wanted us to see other places and other cultures. Different cities have different feels to them, but there's always a sense of being a place where people live. It might be indulgent, hedonistic, practical, industrial, authoritarian, but there's always a sense of people and purpose to them. The city speaks to who they are, what they do and what they value. They feel lived in."

"I think I get what he's talking about," Neil said, looking around. "This place doesn't feel like the ruins of somewhere people used to live. It feels empty, no... hollow. Like a shell."

“That makes sense,” Belinda said. “The true purpose of this place isn’t the city. It’s a façade for the true operations that were underground.”

“No,” Jason said. “I don’t think it’s that simple. Who would the façade be for? The Builder and his people only do anything for the Builder himself. This city is for him.”

“What do you mean?” Clive asked. “It’s not like he can come here and live.”

“You’re thinking in the wrong scale,” Jason said. “To us, this place is vast, but to the Builder that size is nothing.”

“What are you saying?” Sophie asked, lightly dropping from the roof.

“This place is a toy,” Jason said. “It’s not a city; it’s a one-to-one scale model of a city.”

Like everything else in the ruined Builder city, the towers were on a lean. Belinda, clad in sleek and supple leather, slid down the near-vertical wall, balanced on her feet and gathering speed. The surface of the tower was uneven brickwork but her magical boots smoothed her descent. Under the soles of her boots, magic shimmered like a heat haze, ignoring any ridges or bumps and giving her a clean slide. All she needed to worry about was balance.

By the time she came within a few storeys of the ground, she had built up a good amount of speed. Combining that with her silver-rank strength, she launched herself from the wall in a massive leap, over the street below and toward a building across the way. Turning adroitly in the air, she landed on a wall that was at an oblique angle to her trajectory, allowing her to leverage her momentum and run horizontally along another near-vertical surface.

Ability: [Instant Adept] (Adept)

- Special ability.
- Cost: Very high mana.
- Cooldown: 6 hours.

- Current rank: Silver 1 (74%).

- Effect (iron): Gain a significant increase to the [Speed] attribute and temporary proficiency with acrobatics, small blades and ranged weapons. Your maximum stamina increases and you gain an ongoing stamina recovery effect.

- Effect (bronze): Gain supernatural movement powers including wall-running and water-walking.

- **Effect (silver):** Gain additional special attacks and abilities based on equipped weapons, armour and utility tools.
-

From the air above, a sound like a high pitch whistle was growing deeper as something rapidly descended from a great height.

As Belinda ran along the second wall, nearing the corner, she slapped a hand on it, magically adhering the end of a rope that trailed from her sleeve. She leapt from that wall as well, using the rope to swing around the corner of the building. The street below was thick with Builder constructs similar to centaurs but with lower bodies like ants instead of heidels.

The rope released from the wall and snaked back into Belinda's sleeve, tossing her out over the constructs. She tumbled gracefully through the air to perform a superhero landing, right in their midst, both hands landing flat on the flagstone street. She lifted her hands, under each one conjuring a rod, affixed to the ground. One rod was crystal and the other, iron.

Ability: [Force Tether] (Trap)

- **Conjuration.**
 - **Cost:** Low mana-per-second.
 - **Cooldown:** None.

 - **Current rank:** Silver 2 (19%).

 - **Effect (iron):** Conjures a crystal rod, from which a tether of shimmering force connects to all nearby enemies within a moderate range. Tethered enemies are dragged towards the rod, which is protected by a force field that inflicts moderate resonating-force damage to anyone in contact with it. If the force field is ruptured, it explodes in a wave of resonating-force damage. If the rod is destroyed or removed from its location then it explodes in a wave of disruptive-force damage. Dimensional displacement, such as teleportation, severs the tether. Untethered enemies who enter within range of the rod become tethered. Only one force tether rod may exist at a time.

 - **Effect (bronze):** Strength and pulling force of the tether is increased.

 - **Effect (silver):** Inflicts [Inescapable]. Moving or being moved against the pull of the tether causes the tether to inflict resonating-force damage, escalating with distance from the rod.

 - **[Inescapable] (affliction, magic):** Target cannot be affected by teleport or non-hostile dimension effects.
-

The crystal rod shot tethers of barely visible force at all the surrounding enemies. The tethers immediately started dragging the clustered crowd of constructs, which strongly resisted the pull. At the same time, lightning arced from the iron rod in a continuous stream of electricity that jumped from one enemy to the next, connecting them in a chain.

Ability: [Lightning Tether] (Trap)

- **Conjuration.**
 - **Cost: Low mana-per-second.**
 - **Cooldown: None.**

 - **Current rank: Silver 2 (21%).**

 - **Effect (iron):** Conjures an iron rod, from which a tether connects to the nearest enemy within a short-range. If no enemy is in range, it will attach to the first enemy that enters range. The tether deals a negligible amount of ongoing electricity damage that scales upward based on the length of the tether. If the rod is destroyed or removed from its location then a stroke of lightning strikes the nearest enemy before chaining from one enemy to the next until all enemies in the vicinity have been struck. The lightning triggered by the destruction of the rod deals heavy electrical damage and inflicts the [Stunned] condition. Dimensional displacement, such as teleportation, severs the tether, which attaches to the enemy closest to the rod, if in range. Only one lightning tether rod may exist at a time.

 - **Effect (bronze):** Secondary tethers chain from the initial target to a second nearby enemy and from that enemy to a third. Damage to each target is based on the length of each tether to which they are connected.

 - **Effect (silver):** The tether can chain to as many as seven enemies. If tethered enemies are close together, each short tether emits electrical projectile attacks at random non-tethered enemies.

 - **[Stunned] (affliction, lightning):** Target is incapable of taking physical action for a brief moment.
-

The lightning tethers were all short, being tied to the close-in constructs and immediately started firing electrical projectiles. They inflicted minimal damage on the constructs but appeared to affect their motor functions.

It was at that moment that the sound of the descending object culminated in Sophie landing right next to Belinda in an identical pose.

Ability: [Wind Wave] (Wind)

- **Special Ability (movement).**
- **Cost: Moderate mana.**

- **Cooldown: 6 seconds.**
 - **Current rank: Silver 2 (91%).**
 - **Effect (iron): Effect (Iron): Produce a powerful blast of air that can push away enemies and physical projectiles. Can be used to launch into the air or move rapidly while already airborne.**
 - **Effect (bronze): Can affect magical projectiles and some magical area effects.**
 - **Effect (silver): For a high mana cost, create a wave of wind with extremely powerful pushing force that blasts out in a circle from the ability user. The wind wave can affect or not affect anyone or anything it passes over, as desired. The strength of the wave can be amplified by dropping from a high altitude, with the level of increase affected by the speed and distance of the drop. User suffers no damage from ground impacts using the ability in this way.**
-

The entire crowd of constructs was blasted away as if a bomb had gone off. Some slammed into the building Belinda had just jumped from while others were tossed into the empty canal on the other side of the street. Most were thrown up or down the roadway, being hurtled a huge distance.

The damage effects of Belinda's tether rods took effect, the distance from the rods causing massive damage. The lightning rod's damage continued to be minimal in terms of harming the constructs, but the more the damage grew, the more their functions were impeded. As for the damage from the crystal rod tethers, the resonating-force damage was devastating to the rigid constructs.

The constructs were now scattered over a wide area, blue and orange butterflies prettily landing on their fallen forms. The force tether's pull force kicked in and the constructs were swiftly dragged back to where Sophie and Belinda were just standing up. Wind kicked up around them, carrying them both into the air and out of the path of the converging constructs. Belinda looked down to where the drag force of the force tethers was literally piling the constructs on top of the small force field around it. She pointing her open palm at the ground, right where the tether rods were.

A pit, not an actual hole but an open dimensional space filled with darkness, appeared under the rods. The rods fell into the dark, along with the pile of constructs. This triggered the detonation conditions for both rods, the lighting chaining through the pit full of enemies. Much more destructive was the explosion of resonating-force damage, contained within the space of the pit.

Outside of the pit were more constructs the tethers hadn't dragged into range before Belinda conjured the pit. Dark tentacles emerged, grabbing at the constructs and pulling them in as well.

Ability: [Pit of the Reaper] (Trap)

- Conjunction (dimension).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 2 minutes.

- Current rank: Silver 2 (14%).

- Effect (iron): Conjures a dimensional space pit on any horizontal surface. The surface does not need to be solid or supportive. Anyone inside the pit suffers ongoing necrotic damage. If this spell is cast again while a pit already exists, the existing pit vanishes, depositing anyone inside upon the surface on which the pit was conjured.

- Effect (bronze): The ability user and their allies may stand on the pit without falling in if desired.

- Effect (silver): Shadow tentacles drag enemies into the pit.

The necrotic damage of the pit would generally not affect the constructs but Jason's afflictions, spread by Gordon's butterflies, changed that. The butterflies even followed the constructs into the dark, themselves unaffected by necrosis.

Belinda and Sophie landed on a nearby rooftop where Humphrey, Neil and Clive were already watching from the high vantage. Jason rose from Humphrey's shadow like he was riding an elevator.

"Was all that jumping around strictly necessary?" Neil asked.

"Sorry, what's your mobility power again?" Belinda asked him. "Oh right: asking people to carry you places."

"My mobility power is Take Me Somewhere Or See How It Goes The Next Time Your Arm Needs To Be Healed Back On."

"That was one time," Belinda said.

Neil gave her a flat look.

"The second time didn't count," she said. "Half of it was still attached. At least a third."

Liara opened a voice channel using Jason's party interface to speak to the entire expedition.

"All teams need to regroup. I've been contacted by the scouts monitoring the island and several large, unknown forces have approached in underwater vessels and made

landfall at points around the island. Pallav, send up your signal flare and all teams converge on that point."

Jason and Sophie returned to their team to discuss the directive.

"What do you think?" Neil asked. "Builder forces looking to retake the island?"

"There's no way they can take and hold an island this close to Rimaros," Clive said.

"Trying would be insane."

"It's an army of idiots who swap their arms out for logs or whatever to serve some interdimensional idiot in a feud with Jason," Neil said. "No one accused them of being sane."

"There's little point speculating without more information," Humphrey said. "Let's get moving."

Chapter 535

Opportunists

The Order of Redeeming Light had long travelled using underwater vehicles that were neither fast nor efficient but were very hard to detect. As such, they were able to avoid detection by the scouts watching the Builder island until they had almost arrived, their vessels surfacing shortly before beaching against the crumbling stonework shore. The vehicles looking like large, flat whales of green metal.

One of the vehicles pushed up against a point where the canted angle of the city had raised ground level several metres into the air. A massive hole smashed in the exterior had produced a rough ramp of rubble, the bottom of which the vehicle arrived at.

Only a few of the people from each boat were members of the order. Their purpose was to lead the rest, which the order was calling pure servitors. Once essence users from various fortress towns, they had been implanted with purified cores - voluntarily or otherwise – and were now obedient servants of the order.

The three order members vessel emerged one after another, leaving the servitors behind for the moment. Their silver-rank reflexes, balance and coordination meaning the rubble incline was no challenge to them.

“This entire operation is reckless,” said Fila, who was in the middle of the three. “There are gold rankers here. Stealth specialists, no less. They could be anywhere.”

“Then maybe shut up before they hear you complaining,” said Ramona, bringing up the rear.

“Both of you be quiet,” Sendira ordered from the front. “Distraction and frivolity taint pure dedication of purpose.”

Sendira was not just the overall commander of the island raid but also the second-in-command of all the order’s forces in the Sea of Storms. Sendira did not deign to turn to look back while delivering her admonishment as the other two shared a glance. All three were from different cells of the order but the pair had found a swift camaraderie working under Sendira.

The Order of the Redeeming Light had operated using a cellular organisation long before the church of Purity fell. As one of the church’s most extreme wings, they had always been prepared to face religious persecution. It had served them well following the downfall of the church. As a result, the order’s operations in the Sea of Storms had an overall command structure but each cell had its own leadership.

Melody Jain was the overall leader of the order's local operations, along with her second, Sendira, and church advisor, Laront. As the overall leadership was the same silver rank as the individual cell leaders, there was a constant tension between them.

"You think we don't know why we were assigned with you specifically?" Ramona said to Sendira. "You don't want us interfering with your real objective."

"You might be telling us we're here for the clockwork kings," Fila added, "but we know that is just an afterthought. You only found out about the clockworks kings while setting up to kidnap Melody's daughter. Melody is using the presence of the kings as a pretence to expend the order's resources for her own ends."

"You picked us for your group because you don't want our commanders realising that Melody is using the order for herself instead of its true purpose," Ramona said. "While you're keeping an eye on us, Melody's blind little devotees can do the things she doesn't want us to see."

"Only Purity is worthy of our devotion, not his servants," Sendira told them. "We are all unworthy, seeking to cleanse the taint that lingers within us and keep ourselves from any more. To speak in ignorance and disobedience, both of which make you lesser, is to invite uncleanness of spirit into yourself. Your only concern here should be purity of purpose. Do as you are told and you shall lift yourselves in the eyes of the god."

"You talk down to us like a gold-ranker, Sendira, but you're not," Ramona said. "You're just someone who takes being holier-than-thou a little too literally."

The wing of the Order of Redeeming Light in the Sea of Storms didn't have any gold-rankers amongst them. The primary reason was that they didn't want to draw the kind of attention that gold-rankers inevitably brought. Even the most mundane of gold-rankers was the kind of potential threat to stability that people liked to keep track of, especially if those gold-rankers were operating outside of the Adventure Society.

It made sense, then, for the order to avoid having gold-rankers in their number when the goal was to operate without grabbing attention. Long before the fall of the Purity church, the Storm Kingdom had been aware of the Order of Redeeming Light's presence. Even with legitimate churches, their more extreme factions were worth paying attention to, but the local powers had remained unconcerned so long as the order had no one higher than silver rank. When local authorities came looking for them, the order's losses were minimal as their discretion allowed them to enact preparations made while they had gone long-overlooked. The absence of gold rankers had been a better shield than having gold-rankers to defend them.

Despite all this being true, many of the order's membership continued to disagree with the absence of gold rankers within their number. The leadership in other cells, being of no lower rank than Melody, had been a source of tension in terms of authority within the order. Respect for rank was ingrained across the cultures and religions of Pallimustus and many felt that Melody's resistance to a gold-rank presence was to avoid giving up power.

The trio reached the top of the rubble, passed through the hole in the wall and arrived on a sloping street, the flagstones cracked and pitted. Sendira finally turned to face the other two.

"Your only thoughts should be on the task you have been given," she admonished. "The disposition of the kidnap target is unrelated to your objectives. You do not understand what is in play or have any need to concern yourselves with her. Put any consideration of her aside and concentrate on the tasks you were given, not those given to others."

Fila and Ramona glowered but remained silent. They were angry but knew they just had to wait for Melody's poor choices to build the gallows for them. Attempting to kidnap a silver-rank adventurer from Rimaros, with the city's heightened state of awareness and frenzy of adventurer activity was a foolish endeavour. That was why Melody had Laront seeking out information so that they could grab her while she was out on a contract.

The first opportunity to grab the target had been the Adventure Society expedition to the island, which Melody had already rejected. It was close to Rimaros, there were multiple teams and a pair of gold-rankers. The realisation that there were clockwork kings of the island had changed the value proposition, however, pushing Melody onto action. This choice was not sitting well with many of her rivals.

"Once this operation is over," Fila said, "everyone will see that Melody is advancing her personal agenda and risking the order's assets, people and goals to do it. We'll see how arrogant you are then, Sendira."

"Yes," Sendira told them. "We will. Now, organise the pure servitors. The adventurers will seek to scout us out before acting and we need to move before they make an active response to our arrival."

The vast majority of the forces the order brought to the island were the pure servitors, implanted with purified cores. This was a reflection of the new disposition of the order's overall forces. True members of the order had all been purified in the fire of purgation, cleansing them of impurities, but the purifying flames were a limited and precious resource. They were not a feasible path to building the forces required for the war to come.

When the Order of Redeeming Light had established a branch in the Sea of Storms, it was with a specific purpose. They were one of many wings of the Purity church around

the world that had been making preparations for years, seeking ways to establish the kind of power that would soon be needed.

The test program carried out in the Sea of Storms was a collaboration with the Purity church's uneasy allies, the Builder cult. This made the Order of Redeeming Light, bearing the gift of their god's purifying flame, the obvious choice to judge the viability of the program. The order's very purpose was to take that which was unclean and purify it, redeeming it as a weapon against the impure.

The core of the program was a clockwork king that the Builder agreed to hand over to the church as part of a larger series of deals and concessions. The order subjected the automaton to the fire of purgation, wiping away the Builder's influence and claiming the entity for Purity. As a result, the clockwork king no longer produced the clockwork cores it once had. Instead, became a source of the purified cores the order had been using on the essence users of the fortress towns they suborned.

The order regretted that the purified cores were not as ideal a process of transfiguration as the fire of purgation, but what could compare to the power of the most pure and perfect god? The cores engendered a transformation in those that accepted them, which was ideal, or had them forcibly implanted, which was not. Forcible implantation often led to unfortunate, but not insurmountable, behavioural problems.

Forcibly implanted or not, the process rendered essences unusable, replacing their powers with lesser and not entirely predictable alternatives. These were weaker and less numerous than essence abilities but the implantation process raised the person implanted an entire rank. Given that the cores were generally used on garbage essence users, there was a net gain in power. The greatest regret the order had about the process was that, unlike the fire of purgation, the cores failed to purge the inhumanity of the tainted races.

The cores, however, were essential for the war to come. The church needed to replicate the Builder cult's power to rapidly build up its forces, even if those forces weren't ideal. So long as their troops were plentiful, pure and obedient, that was all that mattered. The cores commanded the absolute obedience of those in whom they were implanted, which was not something the order mentioned to volunteers.

The order had been infiltrating fortress towns while Rimaros was neglecting them. If the city wasn't neglecting them, the order made sure it felt like they were until the town's defenders were desperate enough to accept the order's overtures. Melody was exceptional at getting whole towns to take cores voluntarily, while other cells had mixed success.

Purity followers were famous for being exclusionary and judgemental, which was not an ideal attitude for winning people over. The current status of the church only made the challenge greater. When the essence users of a targeted town remained resistant to accepting cores, there was the other approach. Forcible implantation was less desirable, but remained acceptable.

The Builder cities moving to attack had been the perfect chance for the order to move openly on a number of their targeted towns. Volunteer essence users were brought away while more reluctant towns were forcibly converted. Only those who were able to die fighting instead of being taken alive were left behind. Either way, the civilians were massacred and the whole thing was disguised as monsters overrunning towns left vulnerable by adventurers too busy to support them.

The Adventure Society, being massively understaffed, had taken weeks to uncover the truth of what was happening. They were only just starting to realise that something more organised and sinister was happening to the fortress towns, although the culprits were obvious with the Purity loyalist's already having been identified as meddling in the region.

Now that the local powers were catching on to the order's activities, Melody had chosen to be more overt. She was willing to be more open using the assets the order had built up before the Adventure Society grasped the extent of what they were dealing with. This had been the impetus for having cells collaborate, moving in numbers, showing off their stealthy submarine transports and using the pure servitors to raid the island.

Having used the essence users of fortress towns as a large-scale test of the purity cores, the next step was to establish an infrastructure where what they had accomplished could be scaled up and spread beyond the Sea of Storms.

For that to be possible, the order needed more clockwork kings. Not only did they need to increase the production of pure cores but also have redundancies should any of them be lost to enemy action. As the Builder was unwilling to surrender more of the kings, the order would need to take them for themselves. The news of one or more kings being present on the island was an important opportunity, but acting at the same time as an Adventure Society expedition was a massive risk.

If clockwork kings were on the table they became the priority, with the chance to grab their original target being reduced to a welcome, but secondary, objective. The opportunity to accomplish both made raiding the island a significantly more worthwhile expenditure of resources. The Adventure Society would also soon have a better understanding of the order's activities and capabilities, so revealing them now was a minimal loss. The chance

to use the pure servitors en masse before the Storm Kingdom and the Adventure Society knew about them was not an opportunity that would last forever unused.

That was what finally drove Melody's decision to rapidly plan and execute the raid, even if the rush lent to unexpected variables. The pure servitors were always intended as disposable forces and there would not be a better opportunity to use them. This was what led to Sendira watching on as Fila and Ramona directed the pure servants off the boat to clamber up the rubble slope.

The pure servitors were a mix of ranks. Iron-rank essence users had become bronze when implanted with cores, while bronze had become silver and the silvers, gold. They were only equivalent to weak monsters of their rank but the gold-rank servitors were still a trump card that could well be the difference against the gold-rankers on the island. As such, each of the five landing parties had two gold servitors, representing a major portion of the order's overall strength.

"Melody is going to pay for wasting this many gold-rank servitors on snatching up her daughter," Ramona told Sendira.

"Even if we succeed," Fila added, "we're going to lose most of them. Maybe all. Is Melody ready to accept responsibility for that?"

"Melody is fully prepared to bear the responsibility for this operation," Sendira told them, unperturbed. "Her courage is pure. Can the opportunists you follow say the same?"