

Chapter 551

Sloppy Mistake

Liara was flooded with a strange sensation the moment she stepped fully inside Jason Asano's cloud house. There was a sense of oppression to it which only heightened as the open wall closed behind her, sealing her in. The aura pervading the place wasn't exactly stronger than Jason's own, but it felt somehow richer and deeper. It was as if she were extending her senses into a body of water, discovering mysterious depths and untold dangers she was previously oblivious to.

While the sensations the pervasive aura engendered were strange, they were also familiar and it took her a moment to realise why. Jason quietly watched her take it in, amusement teasing the corner of his lips. When she realised where she recognised the sensation from, her eyes went wide and he flashed a grin.

"There it is," he said.

Liara alternated watching Jason with looking around the room as if it were a giant beast that had swallowed her. Jason moved to a drinks cabinet, poured some amber liquid into a glass then brought it over to Liara, who downed it at a gulp.

"I should stock cheaper booze," Jason said, frowning at the empty glass she handed back. "How much did Soramir tell you about me?"

"Almost nothing," she said. "He believes that your secrets are yours."

"And his."

"He only did that because you represented a potentially unknown threat."

"Oh, I'm sure."

"Asano, I don't know what he saw in you, I genuinely don't. But I've never even heard of a diamond-ranker treating a silver like he does you."

"And how is that?"

"Like a peer. He thinks you're going to join him at diamond-rank, someday, and whatever he saw in your soul was enough to start showing you at least some of the respect that entails already."

She panned her eyes over the house around her yet again.

"I may finally be started to see why."

Jason threw the glass at the cabinet, where it was cushioned by the cloud-stuff from which the cabinet was made. The cloud-substance cleansed the glass using the crystal wash infused into it then returned the glass to its place.

"How is this possible?" Liara asked.

“The cabinet? It’s pretty basic cloud furniture stuff.”

“No, the... is it even really an aura that this place has? Is this cloud house a temple to you?”

“No,” Jason said with a chuckle. “It employs the same mechanisms, magically speaking, but I’m not in the club, as it were. It’s not holy ground; it just really, really belongs to me. It’s part of my territory. Outside of these walls, the Storm King rules. Inside them is my domain. Think of it as an embassy.”

“Oh, so you’re not claiming to be a god; you’re claiming to be a one-man sovereign nation.”

“I didn’t say anything about it being one man. What I did say is that it’s an embassy. The nation is somewhere else.”

She narrowed her eyes.

“You’re a king in your world?”

“It’s more complicated than that,” Jason said. “When I was saving my world, I accidentally created a country with a couple of territories. Not large ones, but there are smaller countries. Only two smaller countries, but they’re pretty notable ones. Lots of rich people, although in the smallest one they pretend they aren’t and try to distract people with hats.”

“Hats?”

“Yep. Lots of robe-wearing too, which you don’t see a lot of my world. Not the practical Jedi-style stuff like I wear, either. Well, Sith, let’s be honest.”

“Mr Asano,” Shade said emerging from Jason’s shadow. “Your proclivities are showing.”

“Shade, it’s fine.”

“You know that Miss Hurin doesn’t like you explaining things to people.”

“Hey, you brought the princess here.”

“Not for this, Mr Asano.”

Jason looked at his familiar thoughtfully, then gestured Liara to a chair.

“Alright,” he said as he took a seat for himself.

“Just before the explanations come to an end,” Liara said, “why would you let me in here? Even if it’s just a glimpse, it’s a big secret you’re letting me in on.”

“Soramir knows,” Jason said. “Trenchant Moore has some inkling, I’m pretty sure. If three people know a thing, it’s not a secret anymore.”

“That’s true enough,” Liara said. “There has to be more to it than that, though.”

“Yes,” Jason acknowledged. “Shade brought you here.”

“And that’s enough?”

“Yes,” Jason said as if it were obvious.

“He didn’t tell you why, though. Or that we were coming at all.”

“No.”

“I know he’s your familiar, but there’s a difference between trusting your familiar and blindly trusting their judgement.”

“Oh, I’m aware,” Jason said. “If it were Gordon bringing you here, it would probably be to watch old musicals, which is not a sufficient reason.”

“Musicals?”

“A crystal recording of people acting out stories, like a theatre show, with lots of singing.”

“Isn’t Gordon your familiar with the floating death orbs? I looked those up and the little I could find about them was both unconfirmed and terrifying. The only accurate information the Magic Society had was their iron and bronze-rank abilities, as detailed by Clive Standish based on your familiar.”

“Clive’s a good egg. It’s a damn shame the way he was treated, but this is why I’m wary of institutionalised power.”

“And this familiar would bring me here to watch stories acted out with singing?”

“It could be worse, believe me. When he and Taika get together... let’s just say that you should try and avoid learning who Michael Dudikoff is.”

“Who’s Michael Dudikoff?”

“A real estate agent.”

“Mr Asano...”

“Come on, Shade. She asked.”

“No one asks about Michael Dudikoff, Mr Asano.”

“He’s no Jan Michael Vincent, that’s for sure.”

“Mr Asano, I brought her here because she is facing some of the same issues you did in your world and I thought she could benefit from your experience.”

The half-smirk froze on Jason’s face as Shade continued.

“She finds herself confronted by a sprawling organisation whose agenda is incredibly destructive, but she lacks the effective means to pursue them, even after the terrible price they and their allies have made everyone pay. I imagined you might be able to relate.”

“Oh,” Jason said with a grimace. “That. Yeah.”

“What did you go through in your world?” Liara asked. “His Ancestral Majesty didn’t tell me any secrets he uncovered but he did talk around certain things. He said there were

things inside your soul that even he didn't recognise or understand. That whatever you faced in your world must have been extraordinary."

"The problem was that it only had two adventurers on it," Jason said. "There were essence users, but it's not the same. Their mindset was formed on the sensibilities of their world and they weren't equipped to handle the trouble brought from yours."

"You called it 'their world', not 'my world,'" Liara said.

"It's not my world."

"Aren't you a king there? Or whatever more complicated than a king is?"

"You've researched me. What do you think my general opinion of kings is?"

"So you walked away?"

"I didn't abandon it. It has people and leadership. Better than what I could have done myself."

"And you weren't tempted to stay?"

"That world isn't my home. I spent a long time learning that lesson. In any case, I had responsibilities that precluded me from acting how I would desire. It forced me to work with people I would much rather not. Many had become enemies, but there were larger needs."

He rubbed his chin, thoughtfully.

"Your problem," Jason said. "I do understand it. When you're fighting monsters, or hunting individuals, which I believe you did for a long time, then things are simpler. Even with an enemy like the Builder's forces, it may have been a skirmish war, for the most part, but they were still an enemy we could go out and fight. But this Purity group isn't looking to take the fight to us. Their raid on the island was the first time they came at us directly and even that was a decoy action while they went for their real objectives. They have powerful backers and what feels like bottomless resources. What they want doesn't require them to fight us; their agendas are hard to pin down yet have catastrophic outcomes should we fail to stop them."

"That's a fairly good summation of how I'm feeling about the current situation."

"I know how I felt when I faced these challenges in the past. You see what's happening and feel unequipped to handle it. The enemy is everywhere and nowhere, disappearing like smoke. The inability to pin them down and score decisive victories leaves you feeling helpless."

Jason turned, staring off into space for a moment.

"I have a simple philosophy for accomplishing my goals," he said. "You look at where you are, where you want to be, and then decide if you're willing to pay the price of walking

between those two points. Almost anything can be accomplished if you have the resolve, but you have to be able to see the path.”

“I don’t see it.”

Jason nodded.

“That’s where the helplessness comes from, and it’s like a poison. It crawls into your mind and whispers that no matter how powerful you become, it will never be enough. The enemies will always be too hidden, their backers too powerful. Your frustration becomes anger and you want to let that anger loose because it feels like it will make you strong.”

“Which it never does,” Liara said. “Anger tells you lies. That there are simple, clean solutions. It smothers your judgement and makes you weak.”

The pair shared a look of silent understanding.

“So, what do I do?” she asked. “How do I find the path I can’t see.”

“There is no answer but hurry up and wait,” Jason told her. “You’re being diligent and tapping every resource. We have to keep using every tool we have and hope the path becomes clear before we all pay the price.”

“Is that how you stopped the enemies in your world?”

“I didn’t stop the enemies in my world. We got the catastrophic outcomes I was talking about. The most I could do was stop the world from being annihilated entirely. As for the group, they collapsed after their work was done. Their people didn’t realise how grand a disaster they were bringing about until after the fact.”

“That doesn’t sound encouraging.”

“Encouragement you can get from your friends; it’s not why Shade brought you here. He brought you here so you could talk to someone who understands. I can tell you something about my experiences if you’d like. Maybe we can figure out what I did wrong and how to do it better this time.”

“I would appreciate that.”

Jason took Liara through some edited highlights of his time on Earth. Mostly he described the Engineers of Ascension and their takedown of the grid, only touching briefly on the disasters that followed. Mostly it was about the timing leading up to that; the signs he missed and the mistakes he made.

“...like trying to wipe out an ant’s nest by stomping ants one at a time. You’ll never get them all, that way, and you’ll never destroy the nest, no matter how powerful you are. The more powerful you are, in fact, the more powerless you will feel without an appropriate

place to apply that power. Until you have somewhere to direct that energy, the sense of helplessness will only grow.”

“And what should I do about that?”

“For one thing, don’t let it leak into other things you do. The need to feel like you have power over something can lead to making bad choices. Killing when you should let someone live. Making threats instead of peace; hurting yourself by being domineering when being friendly would have gotten you everything you want without complication.”

He gave her a sad smile.

“I know that’s more what to avoid, but the unfortunate truth is that there isn’t a lot to actively do. All I can really tell you is to suck it up and stay focused, which is the real trick. Be conscious of your state of mind. I let things get away from me and paid the price for that. Something as simple as having someone who understands to talk about it with can help with that, so why don’t we start now? I’ve talked you through my experiences, so how about you tell me about yours?”

“This is all new to me,” Liara said. “The Builder response office has had the Purity issues added to its plate now the Builder affairs are mostly mop-up. It’s a very different fight, though. We knew what the Builder cult wanted and what they would need to do to get it. It was a fight. With Purity, we’re reaching under cupboards to grab at scurrying insects.”

“Mr Asano,” Shade said. “While I am loath to interrupt, Miss Sophie will be contacting you presently on an issue I believe warrants immediate attention. Further, you may wish to include Lady Liara.”

Liara was already familiar with Jason’s chat functions from the expedition to the Builder island, so there was no need to explain as Sophie’s voice chat arrived and Jason both joined and invited Liara to join.

“Why did you bring the princess in on this?” Sophie asked without greeting or preamble.

“We happened to be talking when you contacted me and it seemed like a good idea,” Jason said.

“Jason, I know you think the blue hair thing is sexy—”

“Hey...” Jason said, cutting her off.

“I’m just saying that you can’t just randomly bring people in on team business.”

“It was at my suggestion that Lady Liara was included, Miss Sophie.”

“Oh, that’s alright then,” Sophie said.

“Wait,” Jason said. “If I do it, it’s because I’m wrapped around some lady’s finger, if Shade suggests it, it’s a sensible choice?” Jason asked.

“Yes,” Sophie said bluntly.

“That’s a little hurtful.”

“Asano, it’s a matter of judgement.”

“I’ll have you know that—”

“Mr Asano,” Shade interrupted. “I will remind you that we have company, as well as that Miss Sophie has some news that should be addressed.”

“Alright,” Jason said reluctantly, “but I’m going to be coming back to this issue. I won’t be so easily distracted.”

“What’s for dinner tonight?” Sophie asked.

“Oh, that’s going to be great,” Jason said. “I’m cooking almost everything in palm leaves. I’ve got this—”

“Mr Asano?” Shade said pointedly.

“What? Oh, sorry, Shade. What did you call about, Wexler?”

“I just got jumped by a bunch of silver-rank thugs.”

“Purity worshippers?” Liara asked.

“Not exactly,” Sophie said. “These were local hires, from a city called Casallini.”

“In Giralano,” Liara said bitterly. “That whole country is a stain full of drug dealers and smugglers.”

“A wretched hive of scum and villainy?” Jason asked.

“Don’t answer that,” Sophie told her. “That’s his ‘I’m talking some nonsense you won’t understand for my own amusement’ voice.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Jason said, the picture of confused innocence.

“Perhaps we should stay on topic,” Liara suggested. “Miss Wexler, are you’re certain these men were from Casallini?”

“Oh, yeah,” Sophie said. “I put the hard question on the survivors once I was done.”

“How many were there?” Jason asked.

“Eight, but they were raw garbage. No training, no experience, reeking of cores. They were a local gang of toughs hired to come after me specifically.”

“They knew you were coming?”

“And what did you mean when you said they weren’t exactly Purity worshippers?” Liara added.

“Yeah, they knew I was coming. I questioned the survivors and they cracked pretty quick. These weren’t zealots, just a local gang. They were hired by some Purity loyalists.

They're waiting for these guys to bring me to them, so I say we get the team together, drop down on them like a pallet of marble bricks and scoop them up."

"No!" Jason and Liara exclaimed simultaneously, then looked at each other, slightly surprised.

"Why not?" Sophie asked.

"It's a trap," Jason said. "Those Purity worshippers are a worm on a hook."

"Exactly," Liara said. "The Order of Redeeming Light have been extremely diligent about keeping their operations informationally secure. If they made a sloppy mistake all of a sudden, giving us an unexpected opportunity, it's almost certainly a lure."

"I doubt they're even really Purity people," Jason said. "Probably another level of cut-out. The order will be sore about exposing themselves after losing people while raiding the island just a couple of days ago."

"I'll send civic forces from the Storm Kingdom to sweep them up, rather than the Adventure Society," Liara said. "It makes more sense diplomatically and won't tap the society's already too-thin resources. Plus, we have a large force in Casallini because it's a border city, so we can move faster and with people who know the area. In the meantime, Miss Wexler, I'm using my authority within the Adventure Society to order a stop on your contract. It's low-priority, so no one will be missing any desperately needed supplies."

"I can finish it," Sophie said.

"I'm not taking any unnecessary risks," Liara said. "They have a taste for grabbing adventurers and they clearly know your schedule. Get back to Rimaros. Your contract is cancelled."

Chapter 552

Criteria

A portal power at Jason's current rank of silver four had a base range of two-thousand and four-hundred kilometres, which was true for every portal or long-range teleport ability. Jason was able to eke out some extra range because of the various effects connecting him to the astral, although it was relatively marginal and he hadn't tested just how far he could push the limit. It wasn't a match for a true portal specialist but was close to the upper end of what celestines could accomplish. Like Jason, they had an affinity for dimensional energies that likewise made them naturally adept with dimensional powers.

Jason's normal shadow jump range was line of sight. When moving from one Shade body to another, however, he could travel at long-range teleportation distances, albeit at the range for a teleport power a full rank lower than normal. This was unimpressive on its own except for two key factors. Jason's shadow jump didn't have a cooldown, which was exceptional enough, but insignificant compared to the second benefit. So long as there was a Shade body at the destination, Jason did not need to have been to that destination before.

The need to teleport to known locations was, along with range, one of the iconic restrictions on portal travel. It was arguably the most widely known essence ability restriction of all. While abilities that extended range were common enough amongst portal users, circumventing the need to visit a destination was significantly harder. Jason's ability to do so may have been at less than a tenth of his normal portal range, yet remained noteworthy enough that he had been very careful about letting anyone know. He was relatively certain that even Soramir remained unaware of it.

Liara did feel better after her talk with Jason. He was younger than her children but the similarity of their experiences gave them a shared empathy that helped Liara cope. When it wasn't possible to fix a situation, at least not immediately, it felt good having someone who could truly understand and didn't make a futile attempt to fix it.

After returning to Livaros, Liara immediately cancelled Sophie's contract, as promised. She notified the Adventure Society and the civic authorities about the people in the city of Casallini and orders were immediately sent to deploy forces. Liara was a princess, if only of a minor branch of the royal family, while also being a high-level Adventure Society official. When she suggested a course of action, people took the request seriously and acted on it quickly.

After that was done, Liara returned to her temporary office. Her assistant, Rodney, was in the outer office, sorting through reports of suspected Purity activity to deliver to her later.

“Rodney, contact Cassin Amouz and ask for another meeting. Let him know that I’ll come to him and that I intend to apologise for my behaviour during our meeting.”

“With respect, Lady Liara, are you certain. I couldn’t help but overhear your rather loud discussion with Lord Amouz and he was definitely attempting to make inappropriate use of his influence.”

“His son is in the hands of zealots known for performing weird rituals on people,” Liara said. “If it were one of my sons, I’d burn this building to the ground if there was even a chance it would help bring him back to me. What Lord Amouz needs is to know that everything that can be done is being done. Otherwise, he’ll do something drastic.”

“Like burn this building to the ground,” Rodney said, realisation dawning on his expression.

“Exactly. So, I’d appreciate you setting up that meeting sooner, rather than later.”

“Of course, Lady Liara.”

Liara entered the inner office. The desk had been repaired from where she smashed it but all the books, records and other files had been piled on top of it in who knew what order. She sat down to start methodically re-collating everything.

Once she was done, she resumed the laborious task of poring over observation reports, activity logs, contract summaries and portal itineraries. The goal was still to identify the portal user responsible for extracting the clockwork kings from the Builder island.

During their conversation, Liara had consulted with Jason, as another portal user, about the one she was looking for. Like Liara, he had been present on the island, and with sufficiently powerful aura senses to get some idea of what happened.

They had talked through the specifics of what they had seen, and while Jason didn’t reveal that he had a trick to circumnavigate destination requirements himself, he pointed out that same ability in their unknown enemy.

Liara’s head was significantly clearer after taking some time to relax and get some of the concerns off her chest. She hadn’t slept since coming back from the expedition, or during the expedition itself. She was more than capable of enduring but that didn’t stop her head from feeling like it contained an angry swarm of bees.

Now with a clearer head, Liara realised that she should have recognised what Jason pointed out herself. Her inability to focus had cost her in concentration and the ability to connect information.

After reorganising the records, she resumed her search with renewed focus, making a list of essence users that met specific criteria. She based those criteria on what she and Jason had been able to sense during the Builder island expedition.

Liara had been paying special attention to the area around the forge room where the constructs were being created by Builder automatons. The chamber itself was impenetrable to aura senses, which also blocked portals. Liara had sensed the portal open outside the chamber and the clockwork kings and essence users that went through. That told her quite a lot in and of itself.

It had to be a gold-rank portal, and not just a silver-ranker's portal power pushed to the limit. A silver-ranker who had reached gold with their portal power specifically could only portal a single gold-ranker. Moving two gold-rank clockwork kings and silver-rankers besides meant a gold-rank portal user. Further, no gold-rank essence user's aura had been present. Even a stealth specialist like Liara would have needed to reveal her aura to use a portal power. That meant the portal user was not present and had opened the portal from a distant location.

This allowed Liara to surmise further things about the portal user. Unless the portal user belonged to the Builder cult, it was unlikely that they had ever been to the depths of the Builder island. For one thing, if they'd known the clockwork kings were there, they would have been and gone long before the expedition and not needed to distract the adventurers by sacrificing so many of their forces.

Another supporting factor was the fact that the Purity worshippers had gone down there themselves instead of portalling in the same way they portalled out. This suggested a condition had needed to be met before the portal could be opened. This reinforced the idea that the portal user had never been there, although the widespread destruction within the underground complex may have broken the portal user's ability to employ that destination.

Portal users needed to have visited a location before they could open a portal to it. The reason for this was that it allowed their senses to attune to the aura of the place, like examining spiritual landmarks. If a sufficiently drastic event severely reshaped the physical space, the spiritual space would often follow, changing it too much to serve as a destination until the place was visited once again. If a portal destination was on a

mountain, some diamond-ranker destroying the mountain would almost certainly eliminate the destination point.

Liara had sensed a strange burst of aura shortly before the departure of the Purity worshippers. She was fairly certain that it was some kind of aura beacon that had served as a target destination for the portal the gold-ranker opened from afar.

Liara was familiar with such beacons. They could be sensed in the immediate area, but also by linked devices from hundreds of kilometres away. Her husband had a similar beacon, based on the same basic design, as an emergency signal should he require his wife to come and save him. Fortunately, she had never needed to rescue him from anything more dangerous than his mother.

With Gibson Amouz in the hands of the Purity worshippers, Liara was worried about her husband. He was originally part of the Amouz family and was currently managing an underwater mining operation. Their marriage was more political than loving but she still deeply cared about him. If nothing else, while their children might be grown, she didn't want them losing their father.

The criteria she developed gave Liara a profile that she could apply to known essence users, resulting in a list of names. She started going through all the records she had on each name until she reached the end of the list. She was then left with a problem: none of the people on her list could have done it, according to Adventure Society records. Itineraries tracking Adventure Society members and reports tracking outsiders always marked the people on her list as either busy with society duties, confirmed as active elsewhere or on the far side of the planet.

That was not to say the records were perfect. Mistakes were made and rogue adventurers had many secrets. It really could be a Builder cult portal expert who stayed behind to assist their allies, or some completely unknown outsider. They were less likely scenarios as the details didn't add up quite right, but still possibilities. If that was the case, there was nothing Liara could do to find them, so she dismissed them as possibilities for any practical purpose.

Liara was betting that there was an issue with the records. The Adventure Society was the single most elaborate bureaucracy in the history of civilisation, making incompetence or corruption, more likely than not. She was confident that someone on the list of names, through luck or design, had their true activities covered up.

"Rodney!"

Rodney entered the inner office.

"I have arranged a meeting with Lord Amouz for tomorrow, Lady Liara."

“Great. Contact Jana and get her in here.”

“Of course, milady. Any preference on time-frame?”

“Now.”

“Wexler,” Jason said as he popped out of her shadow. They were on a rooftop above the streets of the small city of Casallini.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I came to ask you the same question. Why are you in the city?”

“First, I came here to hand over the guys I captured to the Storm Kingdom forces at the border station.”

“That would have been at the border station at the city gates.”

“Now I have to sell the land skimmer I took off those guys. It’s a nice one; should be worth a bit.”

“You’ll have to explain this to me,” Jason said. “You’re saying that you went to the border station and handed your prisoners over to the border guards from Rimaros. That’s why you came to the city instead of returning to Rimaros, the way you were meant to.”

“Yes.”

“And then you decided to sell their skimmer since they were dead or locked up.”

“Exactly.”

“Did this land skimmer come with one of those specialised dimensional bags to store it?”

“No.”

“So, you parked it somewhere?”

“That’s right.”

Jason walked to the edge of the roof and looked down.

“Generously-spaced streets,” he observed.

“So?”

“So, I’m having a lot of trouble understanding what I imagine will be a key element to the scenario at hand. Namely that, if your intention was to sell off the land skimmer, then not actually taking it with you is an unconventional approach. Instead of driving the land skimmer to a dealership where they would pay you for it, you seem to have left the land skimmer behind and taken to the rooftops.”

“There are a lot of ins and outs to negotiation,” Sophie said. “It gets complex. Takes you places you didn’t expect to go. Like rooftops.”

“Does the bloody hammer you’re holding constitute an in or an out?”

The bloody-headed construction hammer in Sophie's hand went spinning out of sight over the edge of the roof.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she said.

"Sophie, you can't go after them yourself."

"I'm not."

"Or reconnoitre them."

"I have no idea what that word means."

"Yes, you do."

"Okay, I bumped into one guy, but he wasn't even involved. This is a lawless town full of crappy guys that will stop repairing their roof to attack the first woman that arrives on it."

"You landed on the roof of what was presumably his home," Jason said. "He probably thought you were trying to rob or kill him."

"I don't have a lot of experience with murdering people," Sophie said. "Killing, yes, but not murdering. Even then, I'm fairly certain that people who think they're about to get murdered don't lick their lips a whole bunch while talking about buttering up your flanks."

"Really? Okay, that does sound creepy."

"I've seen that look in men before. It's something that goes beyond want, through need and into something else. A hunger for something it's very wrong to be hungry for. I've seen that look, back in Greenstone, Cole Silva and the hammer guy both had it coming."

"We've all got it coming, Wexler."

"That's the truth," she agreed.

Jason opened a portal.

"Time to go," he told her.

"I'm not your nubile slave girl anymore, Asano. You don't get to order me around."

"I got to order you around? I should have done that more. I could have made you do my laundry."

"The cloud house does your laundry."

"It's the principle of the thing. Besides, I do still get to order you around."

"Is that so?"

"Yep. So get in the portal."

"What makes you think I have to do what you say?"

"You don't, that's fine," Jason said. "I'll let you explain to the others why we're having spirit coins for dinner."

"Well that's just playing dirty," Sophie muttered and made her way through the portal.

Chapter 553

A Matter of Values

Belinda repeatedly thwapped at Sophie's head with a softcover notebook as Sophie fended her off with her arms. As Sophie shifted in her seat under the attacks, the puppy napping in her lap made a grumbling sound.

"What were you thinking, running off by yourself into some trap?" Belinda scolded as she dropped into a cloud chair and jabbed the notebook in Jason's direction. "This guy was the one who had to bring you back. This guy! Have you learned nothing from the mistakes he keeps making, over and over?"

"Hey..."

"He's been kidnapped, tortured, killed. Forced to wear those shirts."

"What's wrong with my shirts?"

"Didn't you just get a whole wardrobe put together?" Neil asked. "You still dress like a tropical garden was violently ill."

Jason's team was gathered in the cloud house. In the wake of the Purity church's attempt to trap Sophie, the team was placed on standby under the direction of the Builder response unit, which was in the process of being reorganised. Originally formed in response to the original wave of Builder cult activity, it now had anti-Purity operations rolled into its purview.

The head of what was now being called the Office of Organised Enemy Response was the same as when it had been the Builder response unit, Ramon Keel. After Liara had reported on Sophie's encounter, he had cancelled all the contracts Jason's team were currently assigned. He ordered them to go on standby, which they were allowed to do at the cloud house. Keel had also sent someone who was apparently on the way to debrief Sophie.

In the meantime, the team was lounging around on an open deck. They were upbraiding Sophie for her recklessness, which she felt was unfair with Jason sitting right there.

"Mr Asano has paid the price for his risk-taking more than once," Shade pointed out. "More importantly, so have the people around him – yourself included, Miss Wexler."

"Not everyone gets to come back for another go-around after they get clipped," Neil said. "If Jason gets killed again, it's probably fine, but we'd rather keep you around."

"Much rather," Humphrey said. He was already sharing a couch with Sophie but shuffled a little closer.

"Is no one going to reject the idea of me getting killed being alright?" Jason asked.

"What about the plan you're working on?" Sophie asked Belinda. "That's much riskier than taking a quick peek at some enemies."

"It's a calculated risk," Belinda said. "Also, it's our plan, not an enemy's. That's very different from looking at a trap and wandering in of my own volition."

"She isn't wrong about the dangers, though," Humphrey said. "Any time you want to back out, we'll all support you."

"More than if you go through with it, in fact," Clive said. "I'm still against it."

"It probably won't even happen," Belinda said. "The chance necessary to make it work isn't ever likely to present itself."

"It seems more likely now that we're being kept on standby," Humphrey said. "It seems the Adventure Society wants to use us against the Purity worshippers."

"They're just giving in to the inevitable," Neil said. "Jason always ends up in the middle whenever some insane thing happens. Interdimensional invasions, a city sinking into the ocean. Some god going insane and trying to turn the moon into a giant biscuit."

"Giant biscuit?" Puppy-Stash asked, picking up his head with a sleepy expression. Sophie scratched him behind the ears and he contentedly settled.

Jason and Clive were in the waterfall room, working on their special project when Jason sensed a presence outside the cloud house. It was a gold-rank stealth specialist, so Jason hadn't sensed him until he revealed his aura. Jason didn't recognise it, but the arrival of whoever it was left Sophie disturbed. She and Rufus had been sparring on the grass beside the river, watched by the neighbourhood children. The moment the new aura appeared, Jason felt anger flood into her aura and she stormed into the cloud house.

One of Shade's bodies approached the visitor and Jason closed his eyes to share his familiar's vision. It turned out that he didn't recognise the visitor's aura because the last time Jason had seen him, his aura senses had been too weak.

Callum Morse was a former teammate of Emir Bahadir, as well as of Rufus' parents. Jason had met him in Greenstone as he assisted Emir and the early efforts against the Builder. Jason shadow-jumped through Shade to join Rufus and Callum who were talking, but there was an air of awkwardness between them after Sophie's departure.

"...is working with the church of the Healer, here in the city," Rufus was saying as Jason arrived. The two men turned as Jason emerged from Shade's body.

"Cal," Jason greeted the newcomer, friendly but with a noticeable reserve in his tone.

"Asano."

“What brings you to Rimaros?”

“May I come inside so we can talk?”

“I’m afraid not, Cal.”

“Wexler told you about what happened, then.”

“About how you and Emir dangled her as bait, and the moment it turns out her mother is still alive, you shut her down? She might have mentioned it, yeah.”

“There are important developments,” Callum said. “Things best not discussed in the open. We should take this inside.”

“Here’s the thing, Cal,” Jason said. “Sophie doesn’t want you here, and she’s my team. You’re not. So, if she wants you gone, you’re gone. Sorry.”

“This is more important than one person’s feelings,” Callum said, annoyance showing in his expression.

“It always is,” Jason said, his voice relaxed and a little sad. “There always seems to be someone way more powerful who can’t wait to explain how important things are afoot. How you have to put aside your small concerns to work with someone who screwed you over because you need to act for the greater good. Is that more or less your pitch?”

Callum frowned.

“Yeah, that’s what I figured,” Jason said. “I’ve been down that road, Cal. Didn’t like where it took me and I’m not letting you lead my team down the same path.”

“Asano—”

“We’re silver-rankers, Cal. I’ve done my time punching above my weight and I’ve lost people doing it. You have gold-rank problems, go find some gold-rankers to help you.”

“I know where Wexler’s mother is.”

Jason’s eyebrows rose.

“Is that so?”

“It is.”

“So, where is she?”

“It’s complicated. We should go somewhere private and discuss it. If not your cloud house, then—”

“It’s not complicated, Cal. Maybe on your end, but on mine, it’s nice and simple. At the end of this conversation, you’ll either be the guy who knew where Sophie’s mother was and told us, or the guy who knew and didn’t.”

Callum’s shoulders slumped slightly.

“You used to have higher ideals, Asano.”

“Yep.”

“What happened to you?”

“I lived up to them.”

Jason stepped into Shade’s body and vanished.

“Cal,” Arabelle said, collecting her old teammate in a quick hug. “What are you doing here during a surge? I would have thought you’d be hunting monsters and cultists, barely stopping to sleep.”

“You know that I’ve been investigating the Order of the Reaper.”

“You’re still doing that?”

She guided him to a seat in the consulting office she had been assigned in the temple of the healer in Rimaros.

“Yes,” Callum told her. “They are a more dangerous organisation than people realise. They always have been, since their inception.”

Arabelle narrowed her eyes.

“This isn’t just you helping Emir, is it?”

“This is bigger than Emir.”

“Well, I won’t pry. You’ve always been the mysterious one.”

“I appreciate that, although the secret is not exceptional. I even intended to share it, if I could get people to listen.”

Arabelle raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

“You’re having a problem?”

“I went to speak with Sophie Wexler.”

“She’s talking to you, now?”

“No,” Callum said. “Her anger is foolish. Pursuing her mother meant getting involved with the order. Doing so at bronze-rank would have meant nothing but a swift death.”

“The pursuit would have been foolish, Cal, it’s true, but you and Emir. You dangled something precious that she’s never had in front of her and then you told her that not only can she not have it, but that it’s hidden and she’s not allowed to go looking for it. I’d say her anger is completely justified.”

“She’s angry that we kept her from certain death.”

“Some of us have more emotions than one of the Builder’s clockwork monsters, Cal.”

“I have feelings, Belle. You know that better than anyone. I just don’t let them compromise my judgement.”

“That’s fine, Cal, but you can’t expect everyone else to meet your standards.”

"Someone should. I attempted to engage her team but was rebuffed by Jason Asano. Should I approach another member of their team, away from the cloud house?"

"No, Cal. You'll only make them reject you all the more."

"As I said: compromised judgement."

Arabelle looked at him with an indulgent smile.

"It's a matter of values, Cal. What matters to you might not matter to them, and the same is true from their perspective."

"Asano refused to listen long enough to learn how important what I need them for is."

Arabelle burst out laughing.

"I can imagine how that went," she said. "Some variation of go find some gold-rankers to help you?"

"Yes. What is happening with Asano? His cloud house is bizarre. It's completely different compared to Emir's."

"Jason and Emir have moments where they are quite alike but are also very different. This is especially true in the directions their paths are taking them, which is precisely your problem. You're the latest in a line of powerful people trying to tell Jason what to do. Not only does that inherently rankle him but if he's standing up to gods and great astral beings, he's hardly going to let you push him around."

"Back in Greenstone, he had the resolve to do what was necessary to what was right. He lost that in his time away."

The amusement passed from Arabelle's face and the flint in the tone of her next words arrested his attention.

"Cal, I know I give you many pieces of advice, but you should listen very carefully to this one: do not test Jason Asano's resolve. He reached a point where it was all he had left and he's just starting to heal from that. I don't know what the future holds for him, but I've seen the other fish in his pond. If he grows up the wrong way, I suspect we will all come to regret it."

"Really, Belle? You believe in destiny, now?"

"Do you know who Soramir Rimaros is, Cal?"

"I do."

"There's a friend of Jason's. Soramir Rimaros seems to be the only one who fully understands who she is, and it scares him."

"Who is she?"

"Dawn. She is or, I gather, was, the First Sister of the order of the World-Phoenix. I'm not sure what that means exactly... Cal?"

Callum was shivering in his seat.

“Are you sure that’s right?” he asked, his voice barely a whisper. “First Sister?”

“Yes. She told me that it’s very important that I help Jason get better.”

“Then do it,” Callum said. “Are you saying this woman is here?”

“She’s been staying in the royal palace. What does this First Sister business mean?”

“That whatever is going on is bigger than just our world.”

“I knew that already. You asked what happened to Asano. His entire world was in danger and he was stuck saving it because everyone else either couldn’t or wouldn’t.”

“He said he was tired of powerful people telling him what to do. I thought he meant gold-rankers.”

“No, Cal. When he looks at gold rankers, he’s not looking up. If you came to him and told him to put aside his values and concerns to do what you tell him, you should count yourself lucky he didn’t let you into his cloud house. You might not have come back out.”

“He can’t be that strong.”

“He’s put a lot of trust in me, but I’m certain that he hasn’t told me all its secrets. What he has told me is that there’s a power involved that he has only just begun to tap into.”

Callum ran a hand over his face, eyes unfocused as he was lost in thought.

“Why does whatever you need have to involve Asano’s team?” Arabelle asked him.

“Because it’s about Wexler’s mother.”

“Oh, Cal. That’s thin ice you’re looking to walk out onto.”

“So I’m beginning to realise.”

“We should talk about Cal,” Rufus said to Jason.

“I know, right?” Jason said. “I’m assuming you’re talking about my awesome exit line for that conversation. Mic drop, disappear into shadows. Such a boss move.”

“Who’s Mike?”

Chapter 554

A Little Damage

Sophie and Humphrey sat in cloud chairs facing one another, leaning forward with her hands held in his.

“You know he’s going to come back,” Humphrey said. “We have some decisions to make. We always intended to go looking for your mother once we hit silver rank. Of course, Clive’s little dam investigation turned out to be a bit more involved than we thought, then Jason...”

He gave her a reassuring smile.

“I’ve already discussed the search for your mother with the others. We were going to do it as a team as soon as the monster surge was over.”

“You didn’t tell me.”

“I wanted the first thing you knew about it to be everyone telling you that of course, they’d help you. I’ve seen how much that kind of support has helped Jason, and he seems to have picked up on some of your traits in his time away.”

“And what’s wrong with my traits?” she asked.

Humphrey wasn’t the expert that Belinda was, but even he could see a trap that obvious.

“Nothing at all,” he said. “All your traits are perfectly charming.”

She leaned in for a gentle kiss.

“You are a terrible liar.”

Her predatory smile was replaced with a frown as she remembered what they had been talking about.

“What are we going to do about Callum?” she asked.

“We need to make some decisions,” Humphrey said. “And by we, I mean you. Starting with if we are going to hear him out.”

“It doesn’t seem like he’ll just leave us alone if we ignore him.”

“We can let Jason play guard dog. He’s the only silver-ranker I’ve seen who looks at a gold-ranker causing him trouble and is just relieved it’s not a diamond-ranker or worse.”

Sophie chuckled, then gave Humphrey a worried smile.

“He knows something,” she said. “But he wants something, too. I don’t want to find her on his terms, but is that just being prideful?”

"It's not *just* being prideful. We already know that what he wants isn't what you want. To him, your mother is a means to whatever end he's looking for."

Sophie nodded.

"Last time we got pulled into this on someone else's terms, we got pushed back out once they were done with us."

She stood up and walked over to the window, looking out over the cliff and the lagoon below.

"I want to know what Callum knows," she said. "I just don't want to do whatever he wants to get that information."

"Alright then," Humphrey said, also standing up. Sophie turned to look at him.

"It sounds like you know what to do," she said. "I still don't."

"You want to learn what Callum knows without agreeing to do anything for him," Humphrey said. "So, that's what we'll do."

"And how do you suggest we accomplish that?" she asked.

"I figured we could point Jason at it and stand back."

"Is that a good idea?"

"Probably not. But remember that when the Builder wanted to stop us and Jason wanted to stop the Builder, Jason won. If he's determined to do something, I'm not sure he can be stopped. It's just a question of how much damage he does in the process. I watched him throw himself off a building and die because that's what it took to stop the Builder."

Sophie grimaced, recalling that she'd been unconscious at the time from overdrawing her power with a spirit coin. Then her serpentine smile returned and she sidled forward, reaching up to slip her arms around Humphrey's neck.

"It won't be that bad this time," she said. "I can live with a little damage."

For most of his career, Vidal Ladiv had served as a low-level liaison between the Adventure Society and the Rimaros Civic Authority Council. While the royal family might rule the Storm Kingdom and its capital, the RCAC was the actual government authority that ran Rimaros at almost every level.

Like many essence users, adventurers or not, Vidal had stepped up to do his part during the monster surge. Also like many others, the extra time spent waiting for the surge had primed him for rank-up once it began. While he might have been an Adventure Society functionary, rather than an adventurer himself, he had a respectable record of combat experience.

It had taken him far longer than an adventurer to reach the point of ranking up, having reached bronze during the last monster surge. This did not worry him, however, as he was happy to make safe, solid progress through both his ranks and his career. Once the surge started and there was a mad scramble to adapt, he'd gotten plenty of combat experience. Much of it had been guarding airships delivering goods and he had even fought the bold sky pirates that had encroached on the Storm Kingdom. It was after that epic battle that saw multiple airships wrecked and fall out of the sky, that Vidal had ranked up. Now that he was a freshly minted silver, his career had taken a sudden leap forward.

With his record of excellence, Vidal's rank-up had swiftly led to a promotion from top-level Adventure Society functionary to full Adventure Society official. This was an important transition, akin to a soldier earning their commission and becoming an officer. It moved him from a career track where he had already reached to top to one where he was at the bottom, but like going from peak bronze-rank to the bottom of silver, it was an undeniable step up.

At first, Vidal had retained his position as a liaison to the civic authorities but, with the reorganisation of the Builder response unit, he had been moved into the new Office of Organised Enemy Response. While he had done his share of monster hunting during the surge, his chief role in the new department was as an administrator. His combined capability in both fields was what had earned him the move to the new office, with his new role a dynamic mix of being active in the field and actively digging through paperwork.

The new office needed personnel who could hold their own out in the world. People who could navigate regions that wouldn't always be safe. At the current point in time, that meant everywhere. It was an exciting opportunity for Vidal and he was looking forward to the promised training that would come once the monster surge had died down and the new department was more settled. One of the unspoken tests would be to demonstrate what he could do without haring off to attempt what he was not yet ready for.

Until there was time to provide additional training, new members like Vidal were being assigned tasks that fell within their already established skill sets. For administrative liaison Vidal, that meant a lot of running around the Sea of Storms, contacting various people of interest to the department for non-suspicious reasons. If the people in question were being looked at in a more investigative manner, the Adventure Society would send someone very different, at least until Vidal gained more experience and training.

In his liaison role, Vidal had spent years meeting with people on behalf of the Adventure Society and the Rimaros government. Over the course of his career, he'd learned a lot about measuring the status of people based on how the society treated them,

adventurer or not. Rank was the most obvious factor, with origin, known affiliations and family following close behind. With non-adventurers, it was usually quite easy to place any given person within a social hierarchy.

Adventurers were always the ones who threw out surprises. Guild membership made things easier, but even within guilds and established families, there were no guarantees. Favoured scions fell short while unexpected heroes rose up. What the upper echelons of the Adventure Society thought about any given adventure was not widely disseminated amongst the low-level officials and functionaries, but Vidal had learned to read the signs.

While there were many nuances that Vidal had come to recognise, some signs were quite obvious. When he was sent out to debrief an adventurer instead of their being called into the Adventure Society campus, for example, he knew that even if their name was unfamiliar, they were someone to watch.

In the case of Sophie Wexler, the quick background information he called up before setting out to debrief her was revealing. On the face of it, while she might be a silver-ranker and a member of a prestigious foreign guild, that meant less during a monster surge, especially so far from their guild's seat of power in Vitesse. What caught Vidal's eye were her companions.

Wexler's team included several notable individuals, starting with Humphrey Geller. The Gellers were technically aristocracy in some inconsequential town somewhere, but their true prestige came from being an adventuring dynasty. Not every Geller turned out exceptional, but only a fool would overlook anyone carrying the name.

Another team member that stood out was Clive Standish. A former member of the Magic Society who had some manner of falling out with that organisation. Vidal was aware of various accommodations the Adventure Society had made to include Standish in collaborations with the Magic Society. This was less overt a move than going out to meet Wexler instead of calling her in, but someone with authority clearly valued Standish highly.

Standish's contention with the Magic Society was noted in his records, although the reasons why were sealed. Someone had pulled strings to get Standish involved in joint projects with the Adventure Society in ways that would not cause him to pull out. Who was pulling those strings also remained a mystery and Vidal knew he was likely better off not finding out. Thus far, only a few minor projects related to astral magic had been affected, but Vidal had been working with bureaucracy for some time. He recognised someone laying groundwork when he saw it. Why a silver-ranker warranted such attention, Vidal had no idea.

The last member of the group stood out the most, at least to Vidal, as the majority of his Adventure Society record was under seal. What information remained was fragmented and often contradictory, including a confirmation notice of his death some three years ago.

Vidal had met Jason Asano before. Vidal had introduced him and his companion to the monster surge protocols before they even arrived in Rimaros. Jason Asano had been using Vidal to practise some manner of aura disguise technique, which had prompted Vidal to flag him for investigation by the Builder response unit.

Vidal hadn't thought on it anymore until he connected some strange rumours floating around with the man he had met that day. It had prompted him to look closer, putting together some of the rumours with certain things he discovered using records he had access to as a member of the Adventure Society. It pointed to some very high-level meddling in very low-level contracts; enough of an oddity that he took what he found to the Adventure Society's internal auditing department.

Shortly thereafter, he was politely, but firmly, directed to stop digging.

As it hadn't been more than a point of curiosity, Vidal had done exactly that, paying no more attention until he was contacted by his friend Rodney. Like Vidal, Rodney had been moved into the new Office of Organised Enemy Response during the reorganisation. Rodney was a purely administrative functionary and lower-ranked than Vidal, both in terms of magic and position. His assignment as assistant to the office's deputy director, Princess Liara Rimaros, gave him a significant level of influence, however.

Rodney had appeared in Vidal's new office and they chatted for a while. Rodney's position had just been changed from a temporary one to a permanent assignment, for which Vidal congratulated him. Rodney gave Vidal his assignment to go debrief Sophie Wexler, which had come directly from the princess instead of the usual pathways.

"Is there anything I need to be aware of, regarding this?" Vidal had asked.

"I'm not sure," Rodney said. "There's still a lot of high-level things I don't know about, but be careful around this adventuring team. There's a lot of people whose attention you do not want quietly putting their attention on this team, despite the nothing contracts they've been on. My advice is to do your job as instructed and don't do anything you weren't instructed to. You'll be reporting directly to the princess on this, and she seems to be social with this Asano character."

"It sounds like I'm being dunked into a mess I don't want any part of."

"You're good at your job, Vidal, which is why that's an accurate assessment."

Vidal didn't need a boat to travel across the water, instead, riding an aqueous column of magic from Livaros to Arnote. He could have travelled faster between the islands, now that he had ranked up to silver, but moderated his speed to avoid attracting monsters. When prepping for this debrief he found a report detailing Wexler's encounter with the reef kraken Zila Rimaros had just gone out to eliminate personally before it affected shipping lanes. As to how Wexler had escaped the gold-rank creature after flying into its path at speed, he had no idea. The size, speed and power of a reef kraken was a well-understood menace in the Sea of Storms.

Arriving at the island of Arnote, Vidal rode his water column into a lagoon. The sleepy town of Palisaros was arrayed along the shore and along the clifftop that bordered the lagoon. He headed for the waterfall, knowing that Wexler's team was staying in a house next to the river spilling over the cliff. The column vanished as Vidal entered the waterfall, which started curving around him without wetting his clothes. He started moving up through the waterfall, the invisible bubble around him outlined by the water passing over it.

Most of the way up the cliff, still moving up through the waterfall, Vidal stopped after encountering something odd. There was a cave behind the waterfall containing a well-lit chamber that looked to be some kind of magical research room with furniture made out of clouds. Two men were looking at him floating in the waterfall, unsurprised, as he looked back.

"I guess you'd better come in, then," Jason said.

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."

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.

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.”