

Chapter 546

Blame

The Adventure Society functionary left Liara's temporary office after informing her about the arrival of Lord Cassin Amouz. Once she was alone, Liara allowed shame to flash over her expression before schooling it. Liara had been determined to avoid casualties in the expedition to the Builder island but the unexpected raid by Purity worshippers had led to her failure. Three adventurers had been captured in battle and only two were recovered before they could be taken from the island. The son and heir of Lord Amouz had been the only adventurer the enemy had managed to escape with.

Gibson Amouz – her husband's cousin Gibbie – had been spirited away from the island, as had a pair of clockwork kings. The hostage had been extracted by water, while the kings had been portalled away, along with a small handful of Purity worshippers. Finding them all had become Liara's obsession now the expedition was done.

One of the best leads she had was Jason Asano's familiar, who had tracked the enemy from the island. Unfortunately, the enemy's security precautions had thus far prevented the familiar from reporting back with any details, its current disposition unknown.

Liara had been going over records of any portal user strong enough to move the two gold-rank construct kings. Normally that would be futile, but during a monster surge – especially this monster surge – even gold-rank portal users were carefully tracked. It was known by the Adventure Society that prior to the Purity church's fall, the Order of Redeeming Light had no gold-rankers in the Sea of Storms, which is why it had largely gone overlooked. While some entirely unknown gold-ranker may have been brought in, it was quite unlikely.

It was difficult to go entirely unnoticed by the time an essence user reached gold-rank, even when they were entirely unaffiliated with the Adventure Society, Magic Society or any other major force. One way or another, it was almost impossible to secretly reach gold-rank given the requirements to do so. It took years of activity to reach that level through monster hunting, and the monsters required for the latter stages especially couldn't just be anonymously wiped out without being noticed. As for advancement through monster cores, that many high-rank cores couldn't just vanish off the market unnoticed.

That was not to say a secret gold-ranker was impossible. With the right support and sufficient patience, it would be possible to raise one up and some groups were known to have done so in the past. Liara was well aware that the secretive Order of Redeeming

Light was a likely candidate for such a project, but that was the very reason that such organisations were watched with extra care by the Adventure Society.

The high-end monster core market and high-rank monster-slaying were both carefully recorded by the Adventure Society. This was done specifically to keep track of potential gold-rank threats by the same department that hunted down people with restricted essences and powers. Liara had been a member of that department for years until being moved to the Builder response unit, hunting down vampires, necromancers and other major threats. Her previous posting meant she had the access and the experience required to go through the records looking for just that kind of activity and to locate already known gold-rankers operating outside of the aegis of the Adventure Society.

As for gold-rankers that were members of the Adventure Society, the portal users were rigorously tracked during monster surges, not because they were threats but to maximise their utility. Between the society member records and the tracking information for rogue essence-users, the monster surge gave Liara a unique opportunity to potentially track the portal user that extracted the clockwork kings and the Purity worshippers.

The largest impediment to Liara's search was it being a process of elimination from a vast collection of records. Portal schedules, market tracking, field reports about encounters with rogue essence users. The nature of portal users was that they could operate over vast distances, expanding the number of records she had to go through. A high-rank mind could rapidly process information with excellent retention, making every gold-ranker a speed-reader with near-eidetic memory. Even so, the sheer amount of information she had to go over was daunting, and she needed to do it alone. The records she was going over were all about gold-rankers, which needed to be heavily restricted or high-ranked adventurers wouldn't subject themselves to them.

For this reason, Liara's desk was piled high with record books. If not for magical books allowing records to be duplicated between branches, what she was attempting wouldn't be possible at all. She would have liked to take up Jason's offer to have Shade use his many bodies to help her go over them, but she couldn't cut corners. The Adventure Society had to maintain its integrity in the eyes of gold-rankers and adventurers in general or they wouldn't be able to operate as an organisation. An isolated, rural branch being corrupt was one thing, but Rimaros was the heart of civilisation and power.

Sensing her husband's uncle approaching the door of her office, Liara stood up. He entered without knocking as their auras met; the etiquette of high-rankers was based heavily around aura interactions. It was one of the reasons that aura control was increasingly important at high-rank. Improper training increasingly stood out at the upper

echelons of society. For this reason, aristocrats who ranked up with cores and had never fought a monster in their lives often had aura control that rivalled an adventurer.

“Lord Amouz,” Liara greeted, her voice sober.

“Really, Liara?” he asked with a smile. “Lord Amouz?”

“I lost your son.”

“You and I are adventurers, as is my son. We all understand that it comes with risk. My nephew might have married into your house and not you into ours, but it doesn’t change that you and I are family.”

Cassin Amouz had swarthy skin with the clean, smooth perfection of gold-rank. His hair and eyes were a rich shade of brown, with the metallic sheen ubiquitous amongst celestines. Less ubiquitous was his goatee, which was highly unusual. Very few celestines could grow facial hair and it was usually a sign of one parent being from another race, the birth made possible with the help of the church of Fertility.

“Lord Amouz, I want to apologise again for the capture of your son while he was under my command.”

“You can still call me Uncle Cassin.”

“I could tell Uncle Cassin to go home,” Liara said. “Lord Amouz, on the other hand, can use his influence to forcibly obtain a briefing to which he isn’t entitled.”

The friendly smile on Cassin’s face froze.

“You said it yourself, Liara: it’s my son. A son that you lost.”

Liara’s eyes narrowed and she tilted her head, lost for a moment in thought.

“Thank you, Lord Amouz. I’ve been blaming myself for your son’s loss, which is unproductive and unhelpful to my judgement. Having someone else blame me was what I needed to look at the situation more objectively. I appreciate that.”

Cassin frowned.

“Let’s just move forward with the briefing,” he said. “I understand there is some manner of spy attached to the enemy?”

“I wouldn’t normally disclose operational matters,” she said, “but as I have been directed to give you a basic briefing, I will do so. Please understand that I will be avoiding too many specifics.”

“Of course. I can’t expect special treatment just because we’re family.”

“You’re getting special treatment because you’re Lord Amouz, not because you’re family. I wouldn’t let you anywhere near this if I had my way. You shouldn’t have access to any of the sensitive information still in play.”

“Yet I do. I find it best to act in accordance with the way things are, Liara, not the way they should be. It's the practical but sometimes unfortunately necessary approach.”

Liara frowned but nodded her acknowledgement.

“As it stands,” she said, “our informational asset is unable to communicate with us because the enemy stronghold has preventative measures in place. While we are awaiting word, other approaches are being taken to locate and liberate your son.”

“Such as?”

“Specialist teams are examining the Purity worshippers that fell on the island as well as any traces they left behind. The prisoners are being questioned, although they are zealots and we cannot expect much.”

“Leave me alone with one of them and they'll talk.”

“With all due respect, Lord Amouz, no they won't. Your frustration at your impotence in retrieving your son makes you angry and anger feels powerful. The truth is just the opposite. Without the right essence abilities, all anger does is make you weak and your judgement compromised. It leads you to throw around your influence in ways that you shouldn't, accomplishing nothing but slowing down the people working to get your son back to you.”

“I don't like your tone, Princess.”

“I don't care.”

Cassin glared at Liara.

“I've come to you today to warn you that retrieving my son should be a priority not just because of his social standing. You know Gibson, of course. He was never going to be the greatest adventurer.”

“He's quite capable.”

“With the training he's received, it would be near impossible to lack at least basic capability. His problem has always been timidity. Not cowardice, but a significant deficit of boldness. He's an excellent administrator and I always held that he will make a fine head to our household once I step down, if only he can develop some boldness. Administering the family's holdings is all well and good but it's not enough when he needs to lead. When he begged off the post your husband now holds, I knew I had to step in. I was rather hoping that this monster surge would finally be the making of him.”

“I know what you are going to say, Lord Amouz. Since you were kind enough to rectify my own lapse in judgement, I have realised that while I've been blaming myself for the capture of your son, I was wrong to do so.”

“I am an adventurer, Liara, just like you. We both understand that some events are out of our control, no matter how well we prepare. It is the reality of what we do.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “I suspect the blame lies with you, Lord Amouz.”

“Me? I may have gotten my son’s team assigned to your expedition but if they were anything less than fully qualified, the Adventure Society would never have allowed it.”

Liara's eyebrows lifted in surprise.

“You had his team assigned to my expedition? I didn’t know that, but it’s irrelevant. You’ve been setting Gibson up for far longer than the expedition.”

“Explain yourself,” Cassin growled.

“I had been wondering about certain aspects of how the Purity worshippers behaved on the island. Why some of them grouped up to attack a gathered force of four adventurer teams. Why they captured people and why your son was so quickly and carefully extracted while the others were transported more carelessly. I should have seen it earlier.”

“What do you mean?” Cassin asked.

“It’s no secret that you share more with Gibson than you should – Uncle Cassin. He has too many of your family’s secrets. Things he shouldn’t have been told until he was gold-rank and ready to assume your seat in House Amouz. I believe that it’s very likely your son was specifically targeted.”

“Why would the Purity church care about what my son knows? Those are family secrets. Purity isn’t going into the mining business.”

“The material reserves provided by your family are strategically critical to Rimaros,” Liara said, standing up. “We’re done here, Lord Amouz. I need to go report my suspicions and you need to prepare to brief the Adventure Society on the potential damage that could be done with the information your son has. You can expect to hear from us soon.”

“Hold on,” Cassin said, also getting to his feet. “I came here to be briefed on how you’re going to get my son back.”

“And I didn’t push back on that the way I should have, because I felt guilty. I’m pushing now. Get out of my office, Lord Amouz.”

“I will remind you, Princess, that your husband is currently at one of my family's more difficult to access underwater facilities.”

Liara went dead still for a long moment and her aura vanished from the room. Cassin felt a chill run through him before Liara’s aura returned as a gentle, polite glow in his senses.

“Lord Amouz,” she said, her voice quiet and soft. “I understand that your son’s predicament has left you in a state of distress, so I shall put aside the fact that you just

threatened the family member of a member of the Adventure Society. Be aware, however, that as of this moment, my forbearance has reached its limit. If you use your influence to come sniffing around my operation again, I will smack you down. If, on the other hand, you threaten my husband again – your sister’s son – then your own son will have a position to return to once I rescue him because his father will have gone mysteriously missing and will never be found again.”

Cassin snorted derision.

“You generously forgave my threat, only to make one of your own?”

“Yes,” Liara said, her voice still gentle. “I threatened you, Lord Amouz, whereas you threatened my family. Your own family. I understand that you are angry and distraught, but you are an adventurer turned mining administrator. You know what I am and what I’ve done, so I will give you a moment to think very carefully before deciding if you’re going to leave this room or die in it.”

Cassin’s eyes didn’t leave Liara’s face. His expression was twisted, his lip curling as if angry words were trying to escape his mouth. Slowly he controlled his expression until his face was blank aside from his burning eyes. He turned and walked away without saying another word.