

Chapter 539

Here to Steal

The commander of the Purity forces on the island was Sendira. She had separated from most of the converted in her group, leaving them on the surface to delay and distract any adventurers that found the entrance to the underground complex they were using. Only the other two essence users and the pair of gold-rank converted assigned to her moved with her into the underground portions of the city.

The subterranean infrastructure beneath the city had been devastated by the detonation of a weapon of mass destruction, collapsing the vast majority of it. Navigating to the location where the clockwork kings were producing more constructs would be difficult and dangerous. With most of the tunnels and chambers having either collapsed already or being on the verge of doing so, a combination of the right powers and the right knowledge was essential to traversing them.

Sendira did not know where Melody obtained the information she had about the island infrastructure and did not ask. She had faith in Melody and the priest, Laront, second only to her faith in their god. The information Melody gave Sendira was only part of the equation, however, as it predated the massive destruction. At best it gave her some potential entry points to check.

The real trick would be navigating the new state of the subterranean complex, for which one of the essence users with Sendira was required. Fila and Ramona weren't wrong in their assumption that Sendira wanted them under her thumb instead of causing trouble for Melody's plans. That was only a secondary concern to Sendira, who needed their powers to complete the task before them. Fila had a scouting power set, with abilities from the air essence that let her navigate by tracing airflow. She would be able to seek out viable pathways forward, saving vast amounts of time by avoiding dead ends. It made her ideal for navigating the dangerous underground passages beneath the city. As for Ramona, her earth essence powers would help assure their safety while exploring unstable tunnels.

The trio of essence users and their two gold-rank converted moved through the tunnels. They squeezed their way down half-collapsed passages and dropped through floors that had fallen into rooms below. Fila plotted their path forward and down while Ramona cleared passages so that more than a breeze could pass through them. She also warned them of critically unstable areas where they needed to detour or they would bring the roof down on themselves.

As they realised that they were genuinely needed, the suspicious attitudes of Fila and Ramona were tamped down, although far from eliminated. While they might be antagonistic over leadership within the Order of Redeeming light, they were, ultimately allies. Their loyalty to the order itself was unflinching and allowed them to work together. While not above a bit of backstabbing, they all understood that the enemy, ultimately, was an unclean world.

The gold rank adventurer, Jana, arrived to shackle the gold-rank converted that Jason and his allies captured. She took them away for delivery to a support platform floating offshore that was the base station for the scouts maintaining surveillance on the island. Jana brought with her instructions from Liara that Team Work Saw and Team Biscuit were not to join the search for the captured adventurers but to find and disable the aura beacon. The beacon's false aura was blanketing the island, disrupting senses and communication and hampering the search for the enemy and their prisoners.

They were the obvious choice for the task, given Jason's enhanced senses and insight into Builder magic. More importantly, they had Clive.

"Who's Reed Richards?" Clive asked as he listened to Jason.

"He's basically my world's version of you."

"And you know this person?"

"No, he's made up. He's kind of unrealistically good at all the magic. They call it science, but it's clearly magic gibber."

"Um, thank you?"

While a gold-rank stealth specialist like Jana could move safely through the city even at speed, two teams of silver-rank adventurers could not. With plenty of constructs still roaming around, they had to balance caution and speed. Slogging through pack after pack of constructs would take longer than carefully avoiding them, so they took a slow is smooth, smooth is fast approach.

The terrain continued to be complicated, with broken streets, collapsed buildings and whole sections that had fallen into the ground as the subterranean infrastructure below it collapsed. It left even the ground beneath their feet precarious, even if it felt solid. Humphrey triggered a ground collapse with his dive bomb special attack, pulling an entire building down on himself. He had been forced to teleport out of its path, but it conveniently finished off of the constructs he'd been fighting.

Jason's first thought had been to stealth ahead to the beacon himself and portal people in. His senses could pick out the source of the white-noise aura blasting across the

city but he quickly discovered that it also blocked portal abilities. After discovering this, the teams paused to do some experimentation.

Their tests revealed that short-range, personal teleportation like shadow-jumping still worked, but teleporting beyond line of sight or opening portals failed entirely. Anything affecting someone other than the person using the power also failed, including Clive's switch-teleport, even though it was short-ranged as well. Other dimensional abilities seemed to be unaffected, such as Jason and Sophie's dodge powers and the team's various storage spaces.

Team Work Saw watched as they tested Jason's teleport and storage powers, Humphrey's teleport and storage powers, Belinda's storage power and Clive's power that was both a portal and a storage power. They looked on with growing incredulity as Jason and his companions moved on to testing other dimensional powers, like Neil's ability to draw everyone into a safe dimensional pocket and set off wide area damage, or Belinda's dimensional pit full of death tentacles. Outside of the teleport problems, their abilities seemed to be working normally.

"You realise that a lot of teams will hire someone with a portal and storage power in their set as auxiliary members, right? They don't even make them fight."

"I think we're covered on that front," Humphrey said casually. Having tested his own powers, he stood with the Rimaros adventurers as they watched the others.

"You're more than covered," Henry said. "Three long-range teleport or portal abilities. I didn't even count the storage powers. Your travel needs are more than amazing."

"That's a point," Jason said, wandering over. "Should we check our conventional travel powers? I don't have the cloud bus but Shade has his vehicle forms and Onslow can do the giant shell thing. Stash can probably shape-shift into something, right? Anyone else?"

"I can take people with me when I fly around," Sophie said.

"I don't think we need to check any of that," Humphrey said. "We're on foot at the moment anyway. Carlos, why are you making that face?"

With no portal shortcuts, the two teams just made their way as a unit, quickly and cleanly eliminating any constructs they encountered and couldn't avoid. With the aura beacon stifling their senses, it was easier to stumble into enemies, with only Jason having any real range. Team Work Saw were the combat mainstays of the group, their clean, efficient tactics ideal for eliminating ordinary opponents.

"Our teams seem to complement each other well," Humphrey observed to his counterpart, Carlos. "Would you be open to further collaboration after this expedition is done?"

"We would," Carlos said, looking surprised. "That's not an offer we get a lot. We have one of the highest contract clearance rates in Rimaros, with a success percentage to match. Our contracts are looked down on as grunt work by other teams, though."

"It's teams like yours that do the real work of the Adventure Society," Humphrey said. "You and your team are the truest adventurers of all of us."

"I appreciate that," Carlos said.

"He means it, too," Jason said through voice chat, listening in as he scouted ahead.

"Yeah," Neil agreed. "Humphrey is cloyingly earnest."

"Well, I like it," Sophie said, also through voice chat. "He's not afraid to voice a sincere opinion without coating it in snide, unlike some people."

"Are you talking about me?" Neil and Jason asked at the same time.

"I think she was talking about you," Neil said.

"No, it was you," Jason retorted. "You're the one who said something right before. I should have kept my mouth shut."

"That's been true since the day we met, but even killing you doesn't get the job done."

"You might want to tell your team leader to reconsider that collaboration," Belinda confided in Henry, Team Work saw's big leonid. "We're not what I'd describe as a professional outfit."

"Who cares?" Henry asked. "You lunatics can portal in all the professionals you like."

"Are you still going on about that?"

"Your team has three portal powers!"

"Humphrey's is a teleport. That's slightly different."

"Not very."

"Also, I can copy powers, so I can technically use a portal power as well."

"I thought you could only do spells," Neil said.

"My Mirror Magic ability lets me copy other abilities since it hit silver rank."

"Oh, nice," Neil said. "You're really getting versatile. Hey, the other team is making those faces again."

Ramona was carefully shifting shattered stone with her powers to clear a path.

"The constructs aren't coming this way from wherever they're being made," she complained. "Why don't we find some intact tunnels."

"Fila isn't finding the path the constructs use," Sendira said. "For one thing, we don't want to be fighting through them to reach wherever the clockwork kings are. For another, they are likely using a convoluted but clear path. Fila is finding us something more direct. Hopefully, that will help us find what we're looking for and be gone before the adventurers stumble onto it."

"And all the other teams out there are expendable?" Fila asked.

"Except for the ones who kidnapped Melody's daughter," Ramona pointed out. "As soon as the grab team had her, Sendira couldn't activate the beacon fast enough. The members of the grab team that survived, anyway. How many was that, Sendira?"

"We are going to war with the entire world," Sendira said. "Sacrifices will always be necessary and we must be unflinching."

"And it's essential for the war that Melody's daughter be taken? It's no secret she's been using the fact that the boy the Builder wants dead is on her daughter's team to expend precious lives and resources on this."

"What Melody wants with the target is no concern of yours," Sendira said. "Your place is to obey, not criticise in ignorance."

Ramona finished clearing the way and they continued on.

Jason had been imagining some kind of lighthouse structure, but the beacon was located in a low, flat building remarkable only for being the least-damaged one they had come across. They found a set of large doors, discovering signs of fresh combat inside. Someone had fought their way in, taking out not just regular constructs but also emplaced defences. Giant metal arms, once presumably animate before their destruction, now dangled limply from the walls and ceiling. The damage was consistent with the powers they had seen from the converted, the silver flames they used leaving distinctive scorch patterns.

"The Purity people fought their way in," Jason observed as the group walked slowly and warily through the mess. "I don't think the Builder wants his allies here, picking over the bones of his fallen city."

"That makes their decision to act so openly, this close to Rimaros, all the more curious," Humphrey said. "What's worth exposing themselves this much?"

"If the Purity loyalists are here to steal," Clive said, "perhaps we should ask our resident thieves for insight. Ladies?"

"Don't look at me," Sophie said. "I did the running and punching and climbing up walls. All the planning that took place was Lindy's doing."

“Oh, you’re going to put everything on me?” Belinda said.

“If I was coming up with the plans, why did I always end up getting chased by dangerous people while you slipped away unnoticed?”

“Soph, you're a stupidly gorgeous woman with silver hair who kicks people in the face when she gets mildly annoyed. What part of that suggests 'slipping away quietly' is the approach for you?”

“You did kick me in the face when we first met,” Jason said.

“You made my body wither and rot to the point that an alchemist and a healing priest struggled to keep me alive between them. And that was in a well-stocked alchemy clinic.”

“There were good people on both sides,” Jason said, his expression shifty.

“I think I’m going to kick you in the face again.”

“Or perhaps we get back to work?” Humphrey pointedly suggested. “Belinda, any ideas?”