

Chapter 558

Just Some Administrator

Unsurprisingly, the Purity worshippers had no shortage of powers that could cleanse Jason's afflictions. Those afflictions were unusually tenacious and inflicted harm as they were removed, but it was not an insurmountable task. This was especially true given that the Order of Redeeming Light seemed to have an excellent grasp of his capabilities. Jason considered this information to have most likely come from the Builder when he made a deal to have them assassinate him.

These factors made sneaking around to drop afflictions on worshippers in hit-and-run strikes a losing proposition. When this swiftly became evident, Jason focused on dropping afflictions on them in hit-and-run strikes anyway. It primed them for elusive and evasive attacks, positioning themselves to watch every shadow. This took them out of position for reacting to a more conventional attack, which is exactly what they faced when Humphrey came barrelling out of a tunnel, his companions close behind.

Unexpected attacks from entire teams were a rarity beyond the low-ranks. Unless a team was specialised in stealth and Ambush tactics, the way Liara's had been, the ability to sense enemies at significant distances meant that sneak attacks usually came from individuals. The sense suppressing stone that surrounded them changed that dynamic, allowing for groups to bumble into one another. Jason's senses ameliorated that for his team, however, giving them just enough advanced warning to utilise ambush tactics.

Switching from warding off Jason's elusive attacks to resisting Humphrey's onslaught required a completely different approach. Humphrey's aggressive physicality didn't allow them the chance to reorganise, smashing into the enemy and disrupting their formation. The team employed a strategy they had used commonly since iron-rank. Putting a heavy focus on Humphrey, they loaded him with powerful buffs, protections and prioritised shields and healing to both maximise his threat and shield him from enemy retaliation.

The rest of the team mixed up disrupting the enemy to keep them on the back foot, like Sophie, or pouring on the damage, like Clive. The team had the advantage of Jason's senses and Shade's scouting giving them the chance to ambush, so Clive's powerful staff and rod were already ritual-enhanced and he came in blasting.

Unlike in the open docks, the tunnels had no room for Humphrey's massive dragon sword and he instead used his other conjured weapon. The Razor Wing Sword was also heavily stylised as a wing, but this was more like the wing of a rainbow-coloured bird. The

back edge of the one-handed blade was a sawtooth of glossy metal feathers, each one a different, vibrant shade.

The feathers were not just for show, flinging themselves off the sword to dance around Humphrey in a storm of rainbow razors. They joined the crystals, already floating around him, that restored his mana and intercepted magical projectiles. As the feather could intercept physical projectiles, it was an effective defence against ranged attacks, although that was less of an issue in the restricted space of the tunnels.

The Razor Wing sword was smaller and lighter than its dragon wing counterpart. This made it more useful in the enclosed tunnels and allowed Humphrey to fight with greater finesse. With the heftier sword, a large part of Humphrey's fighting style was managing the weapon's weight, leveraging it to maximise his formidable strength. It took a deceptive amount of skill, despite the results seeming crude and brutish. With the smaller sword he still used his strength and resilience to great effect, but also got to show off a lifetime of training in a much more recognisable fashion.

As a general rule, the higher an adventurer went in rank, the more they valued open space for combat. Mobility became greater, powers increasingly covered wider areas and even the base physicality of a silver or gold-ranker would swiftly demolish most environments. Aside from those who thrived in dark, constricted environments like assassination specialists or Jason, most adventurers were uncomfortable when they couldn't move freely. That might mean being outside or smashing through barriers, but the naturally magical stone the tunnels were dug from made no such allowances.

This was where the versatility of Jason's team was able to shine. On the Builder island, they had been working with Team Work Saw, who had regularly proven more effective with their efficient, orthodox tactics and strategy. In the tight tunnels, the situation would have been reversed if they had been here to see, but they had not been chosen for the hastily issued contract. Liara had known full well what kind of teams would be most useful.

Every team member present made an impact, from Neil's shields to Clive's staff blasts to Stash as a tentacled ceiling monster. Sophie danced through the chaos, as free as if she were dancing at a festival, Humphrey's razor feathers and Clive's attacks passing her by as if choreographed. Jason, now forgotten as a threat, was free to dose up the essence users while Humphrey and Clive focused on the converted.

Stash's monster form was a flat, fleshy blob that clung to the ceiling like slime. It was dominated by a circular maw ringed with multiple rows of shark teeth, and from inside the

mouth extended three tentacles. The tentacles yanked converted into the maw to be chewed on and then spat back out before moving onto another victim.

The fight was a comfortable win for Team Biscuit, wrapping up as Jason's execute spell dissolved the last Purity worshipper into rainbow smoke. As the team used either Jason or Neil's looting powers to harvest the bodies, Jason looked up at Stash, still adhered to the ceiling.

"I can't tell if that form is awesome or disgusting," he told the familiar, who responded with a stench that almost rivalled the noxiousness of rainbow smoke.

"Okay, now I can tell," Jason said in a choked voice as he held his nose.

"Let's not tarry," Humphrey said, holding the crystal projection map in front of him. Jason could allow others to look at his map but it would be much the same as the projection to the others. Only Jason himself gained a more intimate understanding of the layout from his ability.

"We still have a long way to go," Humphrey added, "and then back again with anyone we can rescue. We won't be able to hand off anyone we find too deep in the complex."

They had already discovered one safe room full of people, along with a group of pure converted attempting to break-in. They had cleared the enemy and the civilians had opened the door from the inside. The team passed them off to another team, one specifically tasked with escorting evacuees.

That team had been guided by Vidal Ladiv, whom Jason and the others had been surprised to see attached to the expedition. The adventurer-bureaucrat didn't have a map power but had visited the facility numerous times in his years working with the civic authorities of Rimaros. This made him the only member of the expedition with personal experience of navigating the complex. As he had recently reached silver-rank, he just scraped-in the qualification to participate.

"I still can't get my head around this map," Neil said, peering at the three-dimensional projection Humphrey had out. "It looks like a tangled ball of strings and rocks."

"We're here," Clive said, pointing somewhere in the middle, then at the bottom. "And we're heading here."

"I'm a little worried about any people we find deep down," Sophie said. "It'll be hard to protect people all the way up if we get in a fight in these tunnels."

"That's why we have plan B," Jason said.

"I don't like plan B."

"That's why it's not plan A," Jason told her.

“My concern is what Lord Amouz warned us about,” Neil said. “If that happens mid-rescue, it’ll be a huge mess.”

“He said it most likely wouldn’t,” Humphrey said.

“Yeah, and nothing ever goes wrong for us,” Neil shot back. “The moment he said that, I knew it was going to happen. Tempting your own fate is one thing, but that guy tempting ours. That shouldn’t count.”

“Humphrey’s right,” Clive said. “It would take one of the senior staff to not only avoid the safe rooms but also be convinced that no rescue is incoming and then successfully navigate to multiple locations within a facility swarming with enemies, all without being caught. If anyone even made the attempt, they’d be dead. What kind of administrator both would and could manage that, even a silver rank one?”

Princess Liara’s aura had the strength and expert control to hide her emotions from Jason, but he’d been watching her body language as Cassin Amouz had explained the potential for defensive sabotage by the facility staff. Her reaction had been extremely subtle but he noticed it. Jason was aware that Liara’s marriage was a political one, but he had a hard time imagining her marrying anyone ordinary, even if he was a miner. If she still showed this level of concern after decades of marriage, he wasn’t just some administrator.

“What Humphrey’s right about,” he said, “is that we need to get moving.”

The infrastructure nodes placed throughout the complex were all large chambers filled with complex artifice. Some were overtly magical, like the wall panel with a dozen holes from which various coloured crystals jutted. Others looked more like industrial machinery; steel monstrosities radiating heat and steam that left the room sweltering.

In one such room, Baseph Rimaros was standing in front of a large metal box. Aside from a flat, narrow section, the top of the box was angled at forty-five degrees, with ridges to hold a mosaic of square, ceramic panels in place. The sequence of the tiles governed the systems controlled through the node room, each tile bearing a complex sigil that glowed with green luminescence. The colour reflected the status of the various systems, all of which were operating within ideal ranges. Normally Baseph would have been happy that his facility was operating optimally, but now he would be sabotaging it himself.

He took a crystal recording projector from his satchel-style dimensional bag and set it on the flat, narrow section of the box. A projection flickered to life over the projector after he took out a recording crystal and slotted it in. The projection depicted a sequence of tiles similar to the one on the panel in front of him, and as the projection played, the tiles started to shift. First pausing the projection, Baseph began rearranging the tiles.

As he continued arranging the tiles, Baseph repeatedly referenced the projection, playing it forward and winding it back through various displayed sequences. As he did, the sigils on the tiles started changing colour, one by one. Slowly, as he moved through one sequence after another, the luminescence on the tiles shifted through orange and into red. After a lengthy set of tiles sequences, the last tiles finally turned red, only for every tile to suddenly go dim at once.

“Great,” Baseph muttered to himself. “What idiot insisted on installing additional safety cut-outs?”

He pulled a pry-bar from his satchel and moved around to the side of the box.

“Oh, that’s right, Baseph; it was you. Good job.”

He worked to jam the sharp edge of the pry-bar between two panels on the side of the box.

“Let’s hope it does add so much time that everyone dies because it takes too long to sabotage your own damn mine.”

The panel came off and he shoved the bar back into his bag, pulling out a hammer and chisel instead, along with a glow stone. He crouched down to peer inside the box and pushed in the glow stone, which floated in the air to illuminate the interior. Inside the box was a series of vertical rods, engraved with runes. He knew the rods would normally be glowing but a ceramic panel at the back was the only thing lit up, the sigil on it glowing a harsh red.

Getting down on all fours, Baseph took the hammer and chisel and shuffled as far as he could into the box, the hole being too narrow for his shoulders. The ceramic panel was hard to reach, having been designed as such deliberately to prevent exactly the kind of tampering Baseph was attempting.

“That’s it,” he muttered. “From now on, I’m slacking off on the job.”

The scout for Melody’s team came back from where she had been ranging ahead.

“I found another safe room,” she reported.

Melody pulled out a crystal projector and slotted in a crystal. Gibson Amouz had maps of every major complex in his family’s holdings, but only one map of each. The Order of Redeeming Light’s stronghold lacked the facilities to replicate projection crystals and the risk in time wasted and potential exposure had prompted Melody to reject the idea of getting them replicated in one of the Sea of Storms’ cities.

As there was only one map, Melody had personally taken charge of the team using it. While the other teams went largely after the bulk-stored goods in the upper reaches of the

complex, closer to the dock, certain key materials were kept in more secure vaults. Accessing those vaults required either an expert who could crack them, which Melody didn't have, or finding the people who could open them. These were all upper-level officials.

As people from the dock had managed to escape and alert the facility, the key staff would be in safe rooms by now, most likely in the administrative sections in the middle of the complex. The safe rooms were also difficult to access, but not so much as the vaults themselves. It would take longer than Melody wanted, but it was time she could afford since they had managed to prevent the guards from signalling for help. Even if an expected transport arrived late, there would be plenty of time before a real investigation as to what was happening took place.

Melody checked their location on the map, looking for the safe room the scout had found.

"We're a little way out from the main administrative centre," she said, "but there's still a chance someone we can use is in there. Let's check it."