

Chapter 561

Nostalgia

When the two gold-rankers racing to the underwater mining facility arrived at the submarine dock, they found the surface of the water sealed with a magical barrier, shimmering red with shifting yellow runes. The barrier was only from a bronze-rank ritual so they easily forced their way through. The barrier repaired itself immediately, with the water that came through with them pooling on top of its horizontal surface.

Leaping from the barrier onto the docks, they found it full of people. There were no vehicles present but the dock was lined with anxious civilians. A handful of corpses were piled behind some crates, thick blood trails showing where they had been moved from. The tunnels leading deeper into the complex were all blocked by shimmering magical barriers, behind which the tunnels were flooded with water.

Ritualist adventurers were maintaining the barriers blocking the tunnels, as well as the surface of the water where the gold-rankers had breached their way in. Other adventurers had opened up portals through which civilians were filing through to safety. The facility staff were almost entirely iron or bronze-rank, consuming only a fragment of a silver-rank portal's energy with their passage. For every silver-ranker that could have passed through, ten bronze or a hundred iron-rankers could do so instead.

The gold rankers quickly assessed the room, spotting the group that was in charge. One of the gold-rankers went straight for the team leader, Korinne Pescos, who was calmly issuing directions to bring the dock to order. The other gold-ranker moved to a member of her team, Orin Pensinata.

The approach of the gold-rankers did not go unnoticed. Waves of relief flooded the auras of adventurers and civilians alike, reassured by the presence of the two powerful figures. Korinne recognised the gold-ranker approaching her and hurried to give a report.

"Lord Ferringhaas, sir. We were mid-evacuation when the sabotage we were warned of took place. The extraction teams were chosen for having ritualists and water or air manipulators, or had them attached specifically in case of this circumstance. Accordingly, our teams managed to safeguard civilians that were en route to this extraction point. Operations have continued, but at a slower pace."

"Civilian status?" Ferringhaas asked.

"Live civilians are either sealed in safe rooms, waiting for rescue; en route to this dock; in this dock or extracted to Rimaros via portal. We've confirmed that some have fallen to hostiles, either caught outside safe rooms or in safe rooms that have been

breached. Presumably, any live civilians caught outside of the safe rooms following the sabotage are either trapped or dead, but until the hostiles are cleared, a methodical search is impractical.”

“Disposition of the hostiles?”

“A large portion of them departed with all vehicles in the dock, both their own and a submarine transport full of materials. According to civilian witnesses that had already been rescued, the adventurer team assigned to hold the dock turned traitor, helping them extract and going with them.”

Ferringhaas scowled at the news of traitors.

“They really were...” he muttered.

“Sir?”

“They didn’t kill the civilian witnesses?” Ferringhaas asked, schooling his expression.

“They did not kill any civilians outside of two who made trouble for them, we believe due to time constraints. Once they discovered our rapid response, and especially once the sabotage took place. They seem to have taken the people they had and the materials they had gathered and left, presumably predicting your arrival. We believe a large number of hostiles were abandoned in the base and are still active.”

“Adventurer casualties?”

“Injuries, including several severe ones that proved resistant to healing. No deaths. Many of the enemy have the means to impede healing of the wounds they inflict, primarily through variants of silver fire.”

“This is the same fire they were reported as using when encountered during the Builder island expedition?”

“Yes, sir. We have some people who were on that expedition as well and confirmed it. Our severely injured were priority evacuated. A large portion of the enemy forces are non-essence users and believed to be victims of the modified clockwork cores seen during the Builder island expedition.”

“The ‘pure converted’ we were informed of.”

“Yes sir. They are notably weaker than essence users but the primary source of the silver fire. These pure converted are believed to be the bulk of enemy forces remaining. From what we could determine, the Order of Redeeming Light members mostly assumed lower-risk roles in the operation. This allowed them to be notified and react more quickly to our arrival. That said, we believe that at least several teams with essence users made their way into the deeper areas of the complex for reasons unknown.”

“Enemy casualties?”

“Numerous pure converted; we don’t have a good count, but several dozen at a minimum. Most of the essence users encountered were not anticipating such a rapid response and we caught them on the back foot. Silver-rankers are not so easily killed, though, so many were able to escape deeper into the complex. Including the ones killed that were guarding the dock on our arrival, we have eliminated fourteen silver-rank essence users. We estimate between nine and twenty-five more enemy essence users are still unaccounted for within the complex, along with an unknown number of pure converted.”

“That would be a larger deployment of forces than the Builder island raid,” Ferringhaas assessed.

“Yes, sir. My best guess would be that this operation was considered lower-risk as they did not anticipate the Adventure Society reacting as quickly as we have. This may even be the bulk of their local forces.”

“I’m going to reinstitute the capture order,” Ferringhaas said, “but only as a low-priority if safe to do so. If encountering the enemy having trouble with the post-sabotage conditions, capture is acceptable *only* if safe. Otherwise, the kill-on-sight order remains in effect. More than anything enemy-related, first priority is evacuating civilians. No one is to compromise rescuee safety over pursuing enemies. Make sure that all expedition teams are notified.”

“Yes, sir.”

As Korinne briefed Ferringhaas, the other gold-ranker went to the person he knew from her team to get his own briefing. Orin was organising people going through a portal when he sensed his gold-rank uncle approaching. His uncle inclined his head slightly back and Orin furrowed his brow. The uncle gave a slight nod and then wandered over to where Korinne was going over specifics of estimated ally and enemy locations on a projected map.

Another of Korinne’s team members, Rosa, nudged the much-larger Orin with her shoulder.

“You two are as talkative as ever, I see.”

Orin nodded.

“Given how deep we are in the facility,” Humphrey said, “I think trying to make our own way out is a mistake.”

“Agreed,” Clive said. “Using ritual magic to dig through walls and take down barriers, all while managing the water that’s been caught up in various sections isn’t practical. Not

all the way back to the dock. We might all have equipment for fighting underwater, but conducting rituals underwater is something else.”

The team had retrieved Jason’s bright orange, magical swimming belt, which was now secured around his waist.

“Do we even have the ritual materials to get back up?” Neil asked.

“No,” Clive said. “It’s an outside chance that we could stretch what we have, if everything went right, but...”

He gestured at the tunnel in which they were standing up to their knees in water, buried deep under the seafloor.

“...I don’t think it’s an everything-goes-right kind of day.”

“There’s a safe room not far from where we are,” Jason said, checking his map ability. “We can join the people there and wait to get rescued with everyone else.”

Jason allowed the others to see his map and plotted out a route using waypoints.

“That looks viable, so long as the flooding in the intervening chambers isn’t too bad,” Clive said.

Following the deliberate flooding of the facility, all the rooms had been magically isolated. The magical barriers were safety measures put in place to isolate flooding and had automatically triggered, sealing chambers and segmenting tunnels. Only the comprehensive disabling of safety systems allowed the water to spread throughout the complex before the barriers went active.

With no appropriate essence abilities to deal with the water, the team was reliant on Clive to either disable barriers or dig through walls. Other chambers and tunnel segments could easily be deeply flooded, which is one of the reasons they preferred negating barriers. They could see through barriers to gauge how much water was in the next chamber, and disabling them was much easier than digging through magic stone. It usually required metres of tunnelling to reach the next tunnel or chamber, which they were opening relatively blind. Jason’s senses could reach through one or two walls but were significantly dulled in doing so.

They travelled with Sophie keeping a tight grip and a tight watch on their prisoner. Melody was not just collared and manacled but also hooded. It was no ordinary hood, but one that could seal the enhanced perception and magical senses of a silver-ranker. At least, silver-rankers that weren’t outliers like Jason.

“Where did you get that hood?” Neil asked Sophie.

“From Belinda.”

“Why did she have it? It’s not like we knew we were coming to grab someone ahead of time.”

“I don’t know,” Sophie said. “You’ll have to ask her yourself.”

Neil looked at Belinda, who was merrily nibbling on a gingerbread man as she waded through the icy seawater.

“It’s probably best I don’t know, now that I think about it.”

They made their way through tunnels along Jason’s mapped route. Some sealed sections were all but empty of water, lowering the level in the tunnels they travelled through as they were opened. Others had enough water to raise the level, although that was not the most unpleasant thing the tunnels could contain.

The team found themselves looking through an intact barrier wall into a section of tunnel entirely flooded with water. Floating within was a trio of corpses, their lingering auras marking them as iron-rankers.

“Probably came this deep into the complex to hide from the Purity worshippers,” Neil said, watching the floating bodies with a sombre expression, tinged with anger.

“Do we take them out of there?” Humphrey asked. “It doesn’t seem right to leave them.”

“I’m not sure it’s any better to take them,” Clive said. “We don’t have any caskets.”

Clive, Jason and Humphrey shared a look between them. Before they were team, their first contract together was to retrieve the body of a fallen adventurer. They had been supplied with a special casket to contain the body before it was placed in storage, but it was only a symbolic gesture.

When putting a body in a storage space, there was no practical difference between respectfully placing it in a casket first and just throwing it in like a spare sword. The casket accomplished nothing and there was no contamination within storage spaces unless strange and extremely unusual magic was involved. They all knew that the bodies were empty shells, the soul not being an unproven concept to any of them. Even so, none of them wanted to treat the victims with anything but respect. These people weren't fighters but had been doing their part to produce essential supplies that helped save people during the monster surge. They might not be adventurers but they were comrades.

“They’ll be taken care of when this place is recovered,” Jason said.

“That won’t be until after the monster surge, at least,” Humphrey said. “It might be a strategic resource but not important enough to undo everything done here. Those people will be down here for weeks, at least. We still don’t know how long this extended monster surge will last.”

“Don’t underestimate what some logistics specialists with water and earth essences can do,” Neil said.

“Neil’s right,” Clive said. “Remember that the Amouz family specialise in dealing with places like this. Not every elite essence user is an adventurer specialised in killing.”

Jason thought back to his early days in Greenstone where he’s watched essence users building a public toilet. He’d stood and watched for hours, the friendly construction workers surprised and happy that someone found what they were doing interesting as they answered his many questions. He frowned, uncertain if it was good or bad that corpses buried somewhere an oil derrick would have trouble reaching triggered his nostalgia.

“Let’s leave them to their rest,” he said, pulling up his map. “It looks like the best way to go is actually to drop down through the floor and follow a parallel tunnel, then back up on the other side.”

“Not a bad way to detour,” Clive said. “If the chamber below is full of water, it won’t spill in, and if the one we dig up into is, it can drain down.”

The tunnel below turned out to be a good pick. The chamber they dropped into had only waist-deep water, even after their original tunnel section drained into it. The next two sections of tunnel were almost empty, so dropping the barriers lowered the water level to barely mid-shin. Clive needed to set the next ritual on the ceiling so they could go back up, but as a silver-ranker, he could levitate so long as his concentration wasn’t interrupted.

While Clive was working, Jason felt something tingle at the edge of his perception, muffled as it was by the magical deep granite.

“Shade,” he said, and the familiar emerged as Jason moved to the side of the tunnel and pushed his senses against the dulling force of the deep granite. He closed his eyes, placed his hands against the wall and braced himself as if trying to push it over. Extending his senses through the suppressive force of the stone was like trying to push custard through a mattress.

“What is it?” Humphrey asked.

“One of Shade’s bodies,” he said, strain in his voice. “I’m trying to let him know we’re here. There’s someone with him, too.”

“Princess Liara’s husband,” Shade said. “I can almost contact my other self and memories are trickling through.”

Jason leaned back from the wall, tension dropping out of his shoulders.

“If we dig up, make our way along the tunnel to the intersection and then go right instead of left towards the safe room, we’ll find them,” he said. “It shouldn’t be much of a detour.”