

Chapter 543

It Won't Be a Good Reason

The Sea of Storms has no shortage of small, uninhabited islands. One such island was a small scrap of land that was periodically scoured by the magical storms that passed through the region, striping the land bare except for a gully where hardy magical plants had managed to hold on.

The plant life that survived was not particularly exceptional. Examples of all of it could be found throughout the Sea of Storms, frequently being cultivated in specialty farms. What it did do, though, in the jungle-filled gully on the otherwise barren island, was make anything going on inside very difficult to detect. When operating anywhere even remotely close to Rimaros, this was a valuable asset. The senses of gold-rankers were bad enough, but with diamond-rankers active, any slip could be costly.

Three people were standing in the gully, one of which was a gold-ranker, Esteban Galo. The others were Melody and Laront, the leadership of the Order of redeeming Light's Sea of Storms contingent.

"Your name is Laront and his name is Laurent?" Galo asked. "I can see that becoming confusing."

"Best he's not here, then," Melody said.

"His real name isn't Laurent; he chose that to annoy me," Laront told him. "He wasn't fool enough to use my actual name, but it's close enough. Just call him Killian or, better yet, make this the end of your dealings with him. He has a habit of using, exploiting and betraying the people he works with or for."

"Then why do you work with him?"

"Because he is my brother."

"You're a human and he's an elf."

"My father was an elf and my mother a human. The church of Fertility allowed them to have children and I was fortunate enough that my father's impurity was purged to produce me. They went in the other direction for my brother, with predictable results."

"I thought he looked like that because of some power he had. You're saying it's because he's an elf?"

"Killian's failings are many and they are painted on his face," Laront said. "Where is he, now?"

“Early in the monster surge, something spooked him enough that he paid very well to leave the Sea of Storms. He specifically asked me not to tell you where and, since he’s the one paying for this, I won’t.”

Laront nodded.

“He always had a knack for finding what fed specific appetites,” Laront mused, triggering a flash of unhappiness on Galo’s expression.

“My apologies,” Laront said. “I meant no offence.”

“I just want it done,” Galo said. “The Adventure Society has every portal specialist on a tight leash, so it took considerable concessions to make this possible.”

Melody and Laront shared a wary look. An unhappy gold-ranker could go very poorly for them. Gold-rankers weren’t used to having their activities monitored, let alone controlled. There were exceptions, such as the Sapphire Crown guild that worked directly for the royal family, but even their gold-rankers were used to a rich amount of liberty. Even in a monster surge, gold-rankers were rarely impinged upon as they were leaders who themselves knew best how to contribute. There were some abilities, however, that were too useful to not make the most efficient use of during a monster surge. Portal powers were at the top of that list.

The logistical issues that made portals trouble for teams like Jason’s meant that gold-rank portal users were at an absolute premium. Monster surges meant that rapid deployment of forces was frequently critical, allowing entire silver-rank expeditions to be deployed at need. Compared to that, a silver-rank portal user could only deploy bronze-rankers in force, frequently unable to portal even their own teams in their entirety.

Silver-rankers who didn’t have portal abilities close to reaching gold were more frequently employed to deliver critical resources. This was especially true for those who, like Jason and Clive, also had storage powers. While dimensional bags generally didn’t count against portal capacity, too many of them passing through could sometimes destabilise a portal.

The two Purity worshippers were fully aware that Galo was not exaggerating his difficulties. Not only did he need to carve out the time to help them but also do so without anyone tracking his activities. Doing all that for members of their church was a significant risk for him, which spoke to just what Killian had offered the man for his service.

Laront had no idea what price his brother had paid to convince Galo to aid the church of Purity. He only knew what Killian had asked of Laront in return for doing so; a price that came as a surprise. Laront and Melody were ambivalent about the Builder’s desire to have Asano killed, but Laront’s brother wanting the same thing was a different matter.

The alliance with the Builder was rapidly coming apart, with neither side showing any particular malice or care. While the monster surge had already gone longer than some and showed little sign of abating, it would continue only for a handful of weeks more, perhaps a couple of months at most. With that the Builder forces would retreat to the astral, having plundered what they could over the course of their invasion.

At that point, the Builder's interest in Pallimustus would be over while the god of Purity's preparations would finally come into the light. The aftermath of the combined monster surge and Builder invasion would see Pallimustus at its weakest, which would be Purity's time to rise.

The Builder cult likewise had little more use for the Purity worshippers. If they managed to kill Asano, that was all well and good. If not, Purity's worshippers taking the clockwork kings was already the greater transgression. It would be far from the first time one had taken from the other, going back to the Builder's own attempts to kill Jason.

An entire contingent of Purity priests had been defiled by clockwork cores, turning them into converted. It wasn't even the only instance of the Builder using his allies in this way. The cannibalistic nature of Purity and the Builder's alliance was why Melody had not hesitated to seize the clockwork kings.

Compared to the Builder's absent ire, the ill-will of Killian or the gold-ranker they were dealing with would be a more pointed threat. Killian might only be silver rank, but the way he wormed into the grimmest corners made him a nebulous threat if he turned on them – which he certainly would, should it benefited him. Unfortunately, Laront had needed those connections.

Oddly, Galo was the lesser threat. They were less concerned with his gold-rank power than with what he would tell the authorities if connected to the order. Galo's necessity to reliably extracting the clockwork king's had forced Melody and Laront to let him see more of their operation than they liked. Nonetheless, they had taken what precautions they were able to.

They were not foolish enough to fully expose themselves. Their current location was part of their diligence in containing information. Even what members of the order knew was carefully controlled. That had led to an amount of dissatisfaction with the current leadership, but that was an issue Melody had been working on for some time. The operation on the island that was once the Builder's flying city was the culmination of those efforts.

Melody and Laront both felt relief when the aura beacon signal in Galo's hand started glowing and he opened a portal. Two clockwork kings duck through it, followed by Sendira, Fila and Ramona.

"Who is this?" Ramona demanded, looking at Galo. He focused his gaze and gold rank aura on her and she wilted. Laront handed him an envelope and he walked away, toward one end of the gully. Melody led the others in the opposite direction.

One of Shade's bodies was able to navigate the underground much better than Jason, his insubstantial form easily circumventing obstructions. He eventually arrived outside the forge chamber and Jason shadow-jumped through him. Shade vanished into Jason's shadow as he walked into the chamber. Liara was already inside, looking around at the operations that carried on, uncaring of the intruder's presence. Jason walked up to stand beside her.

"The other prisoner freed herself?" Liara asked. The aura blocking of the chamber made Jason's communication power spotty, so Liara only had the basics of the ongoing operation.

"The Purity worshippers who took her were badly injured when they got away," Jason told her. "Some constructs stumbled onto them while they were waiting to rendezvous with one of their extraction vehicles and she got away while they were fighting. She managed to get the hood off her head but she was still collared. All she could do was run until Jana found her."

"And no sign of the other one?"

"Actually, one of the teams has a good tracker. He was able to find where they boarded one of their vessels. Signs are that he was still alive at the time."

"Which of the prisoners was it?" Liara asked.

"Gibson Amouz."

"Dammit. That's my husband's cousin. He's capable enough but has something of a courage problem. His father has been pushing him during the monster surge to toughen him up."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not like I'd be happy, whoever it was. The thing I wanted above all else was to not lose anyone."

"They want him alive for a reason. It won't be a good reason, but it's better than dead."

"And if they do whatever it is they do to purify things to him?"

“Then he’ll be properly messed up,” Jason said. “But you can come back from properly messed up. There’s a guy in our group, Carlos. He’s leader of the other team you paired us with, but he got me thinking about another Carlos I know. He’s a priest of the Healer that specialises in soul damage. Works with people who had star seeds shoved into them. He helped dig me out of the kind of hole not everyone escapes, even though I was kind of a prick to him. If there’s a way back from whatever the Order of the Redeeming Light does to people, someone like him either knows it or is our best chance at figuring it out.”

Liara turned her gaze from the industrial processes still working to produce constructs and looked at Jason. After a moment, she nodded.

“I’ll look into that,” she said.

“So, what about all this, then?” Jason asked, gesturing broadly at the room around them. “You want me to do the trashing? I have a familiar with resonating force beams that’ll slice this place up like baklava. I’d appreciate you handling the clockwork king if it pulls itself together, though. It looks like they used it for parts, but its aura is still intact, if a bit all over the place.”

“The Magic Society will want to study this place and the clockwork king.”

“I say we trash it anyway. They won’t research anything in here fast enough to help before the Builder conflict comes to an end. The Builder is done in the Storm Kingdom anyway, making this place a horror factory that some prick will want to exploit. Let’s destroy it and go work on getting your cousin-in-law back”

Liara stared at the room for a long moment before nodding.

Another uninhabited island in the Sea of Storms was an unremarkable mountain jutting out of the water, little more than a rocky hill. Beneath the surface of the water, however, was a submerged tunnel leading into a complex hollowed out of the mountain. The interior proved that the unremarkable, uninhabited exterior was a lie.

A vessel looking like a flat whale moved through the tunnel and surfaced at a large submarine dock, alongside several identical vessels. The bow of the vessel opened up and Melody walked out onto a ramp, followed by Laront and Sendira. They were trailed by the two clockwork kings, with Ramona and Fila bringing up the rear. For an internal space, the submarine dock was very large, with a lot of open space currently going unused. The facility was designed for a much larger force than the Order of Redeeming Light currently possessed.

There was a large group of order members assembled at the top of the ramp; a rare convergence of the various cells the order normally scattered across the region. They were gathered into clusters by group, Ramona and Fila hurrying to join their own people. They were each the second-in-command of their cells and immediately started reporting to their leaders underneath privacy screens.

Standing next to Melody, Sendira looked around the leaders of each cell, no few of whom were looking at Melody. Their gazes ranged from assessing and reserved to overtly hostile. Melody, for her part, was casually talking with Laront while directing some of her own people to take away the clockwork kings with the device Sendira handed over.

Four of the leaders shared looks and stepped forward, approaching Melody. She turned to face them, her expression unconcerned and slightly confused. Her once silver hair and eyes were now white and pale grey; human colours instead of the celestine ones she'd been born with. Those eyes narrowed with wariness as she addressed the other cell leaders.

“Is there something you'd like to discuss?”