

## Chapter 556

### Coming in Hot

A mining complex lay not just deep beneath the surface but even below the sea floor itself. A sprawling network of facilities linked by a tangled web of tunnels contained a process that went from mining rare ores to refining them and finally transporting them to Rimaros and other cities throughout the Sea of Storms.

The submarine docking station was the only part of the complex not buried under the sea floor and had space for several extremely large vessels. Currently one such vessel was docked, along with five smaller ones. The smaller vessels looked something akin to flattened whales and were the stealthy vehicles used by the Order of Redeeming Light.

Ever since he first entered one of those vehicles, the connection between Shade and his other bodies had been blocked. The vehicles had powerful sense-blocking magic that made communication impossible, as did the Order of Redeeming Light's stronghold, where Shade had been dwelling in the days since the vehicle took him there. With the departure of the vehicles, Shade had the chance to leave the stronghold, once more hidden in the shadow of an order member.

Shade had no way of knowing where the stronghold was, which was also true for most of the order's own members. Part of the reason for the shielding on the vehicles was to prevent the information from being leaked should any of the order be captured and somehow compelled to talk, or even simply eavesdropped upon.

The docking station was a vast, open complex with many support structures to secure it against the weight of water pressing in. Magical architecture normally used magic in place of such measures, but the sheer mass of the sea above warranted additional measures in order to maintain such an large and open space in the depths.

The reason for the space was that it was a loading bay that could handle multiple large transports being loaded simultaneously, which had paused as the unexpected vessels docked and the order members emerged. The first targets they went for were the silver-rank guards that had been added for security by Cassin Amouz after discovering his sone had been taken.

The first thing the guards attempted to do was trigger an aura beacon they had been supplied in case of attack, but the order had already anticipated such a move. The first the guards learned of the order's approach was a wave of artificial aura suppression; the inverse of the artificial aura projection of the beacon. This was a function of the stealth vessels, extending the effect of their sense-blocking magic, albeit at a hefty cost.

The suppression effect was energy-hungry and couldn't be maintained for long, but it was long enough. Between the number of facilities in need of protection and the inability to spare too many silver-rankers during a surge, the silver-rank guards were too few in number. When five vessels disgorged Purity-worshipping raiders, they overwhelmed the guards with numbers and shut down the beacon before the suppressive effect was exhausted.

The order moved immediately to attack the startled labourers and supervisors, all of whom were iron or bronze-rank. They had scattered immediately when the order attacked, fleeing deeper into the complex while the order dealt with the guards. The order had tried to stop them all but the guards sacrificed themselves valiantly to protect the workers, allowing around half to flee deeper into the mining facility. Most of those managed to escape due to the complex nature of the facility and the fact that aura senses were extremely stifled by the sea floor from which most of the complex had been dug.

In the chaos, Shade slipped from the shadow of the order member he was hiding in and into one of the many shadows around the docking area. There was no shortage of them, cast by strings of glow stones dangling from the high ceiling.

The moment that the aura suppression of the vehicle dropped, he was no longer restrained by their powerful sense-blocking magic and he was once again connected to his other selves. The memories of his other bodies flooded in, like a long-forgotten experience suddenly and vividly brought back by a nostalgic smell. Shade's other bodies likewise gained the memories he had obtained while hidden in the order's stronghold.

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In the submarine dock, Jason stepped out of Shade's body behind a stack of wooden crates twice his height. He restrained his aura so as not to be detected, but the strength of his senses still was enough to take in his surroundings. There were lingering auras of the facility workers in front of the large transport vessel, as well as scattered where they ran before the Order of Redeeming Light cut them down. The only living people in the large dock were a team of four order members, apparently guarding the facility's only means of retreat.

Jason's senses only penetrated a few rooms into the facility before they were blocked. Carved directly from the stone under the sea floor, something about the material seemed to impede magical senses. It wasn't an artificial installation but a natural property of the stone.

"What's blocking my senses?" Jason asked quietly. Shade's power to hide Jason from different senses prevented Jason's voice from being audible, except to Shade

himself. Even activating a privacy screen would be sensed by the order members in the dock, let alone if he spoke aloud. Their silver-rank spirit attributes have them senses sharp enough to pick up even a whisper.

“Deep granite,” Shade responded. “It’s a cost-effective means of blocking low to mid-rank senses, so they likely quarry the stone itself, along with the ores located in this area. It normally wouldn’t block senses as strong as yours but when its metres thick, even you won’t be able to sense more than a room or two away.”

“Will it be enough to stop portals and communication powers?”

“Yes. Likely your mapping power as well, although your aura strength may be able to push all of these abilities further than most.”

“We’ll have to portal everyone into this room and go chasing the order, then, instead of deploying them strategically around the facility.”

“That is the case, yes.”

“You’re briefing Liara?”

“Yes. She is readying portal specialists and teams as I do so, including the special team you requested.”

“She actually had them? I only took a punt and asked because she’d been juggling the Builder infiltrators. There’s really a whole team?”

“Yes. She is assigning them to securing the dock, as the only egress point, be that via portal or transport vessel.”

“I have to admire the long-term thinking, although it’s dangerous letting them just float around.”

“Yet, her efforts will seem to pay off,” Shade said. “Once she heard Miss Belinda’s plan, Lady Liara was willing to play this particular card.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “You spread out through the facility and scout. We won’t be able to communicate except at short ranges, but that’s a lot better than walking around blind. I’m going to head back; you keep one body here for me to jump to. Once I open an actual portal, there’ll be no hiding it from the people on guard here.”

Shade bodies started emerging from Jason and vanishing into the shadows. Jason stepped into one of them and vanished.

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Baseph Rimaros urged his subordinates to hurry as he ushered them into the safe room, then sealed it behind them. There were a number of such rooms around the facility and he hoped supervisors were getting their people inside. They were designed to survive

the facility flooding rather than a raid, but they were strong, secure and had the magic resources to sustain the occupants for days until rescue arrived.

Baseph didn't go in himself, needing to do his best to make sure that rescue came. He had an aura beacon that could signal his wife, but it wouldn't work in most of the facility. It would only alert her to trouble, not the nature of it, but he trusted her to be careful as well as decisive. He had never expected to use the thing, but now he would need to reach the dock in order to trigger it, which was no safe bet.

There was a good chance that it wouldn't even work, should he make it safely to the dock. One of the panicked personnel who prompted Baseph to order the staff into the safe rooms had told him that the signal beacons of the guards had been somehow disabled. Even so, Baseph needed to try. If no one found out what was happening quickly, there was a very real chance that once they did, nothing but corpses would remain.

Under the very uncertain assumption that he could signal for help, Baseph would continue to try and help his people after. It was his responsibility to protect the facility personnel from the white-clad killers roaming the tunnels, as best he could. His best wasn't great – he had no illusions about that – but he would do what he could.

Baseph has already run into some of the raiders, who spotted and chased him until he escaped following a terror-filled scramble. If not for his comprehensive understanding of the facility's warren-like tunnel system, he would have been caught and probably killed already. He had whispered a prayer of thanks to the goddess of Knowledge before continuing on his way, moving swiftly but cautiously onward.

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Liara was rapidly marshalling forces, collecting silver-rank teams in one of the Adventure Society's marshalling yards. Unfortunately, she had no access to a gold-ranker who both had a portal ability and had been to the facility. This meant that she would be using silver-rankers exclusively until a gold-ranker could reach the facility the long way.

Two specialised in operating underwater were already on route and would arrive in less than an hour. That would be little comfort to the people already dying from the Purity worshipper's raid, so the silver-ranker's being sent immediately were crucial.

As the team assembled, Shade was continuing to brief Liara of what he had discovered while trapped in the enemy stronghold. Liara hadn't waited once she realised what was happening, allowing Shade to fill her in while she organised a response.

“...specific materials, in order to build their own version of the Builder's construct factory. They intend to purge the mining complex's personnel, leaving only enough to load

what they need. They chose the timing from information I believe they obtained from their prisoner, Gibson Amouz.”

“Speaking of which...” Liara said, looking up to where Cassin Amouz was descending like a missile. He landed hard enough to crack the flagstone under his feet, which immediately started repairing itself. Adventure Society marshalling yards were always built to handle abuse.

Cassin looked at Liara and then at Shade standing next to her.

“You’re the one who has seen my son?” he demanded. Liara immediately activated a privacy screen.

“I have not seen your son,” Shade said. “I have been in a location where your son is being held.”

“Where is he?”

“I do not know, I am sorry,” Shade said. “I am confident, however, that he is still alive.”

“Tell me where—”

Cassin stepped menacingly at Shade only for another figure to step out of the shadowy body. It was a small man, draped in blood red adventuring robes and an impossibly dark cloak. From within the hood, a pair of alien eyes looked out. Cassin was taken aback by his inability to sense any aura from the man standing right in front of him.

“I understand your distress, Lord Amouz,” Jason said. “We don’t know where your son is – yet. The zealots are very careful about giving out information.”

“Put me in a room with one and they’ll talk.”

“No they won’t, sir,” Jason said, “and I think you know that. A plan is in progress to determine the location of their main facility, expose it and rescue your son.”

“And that plan is...?”

“In progress,” Jason said. “And as time is of the essence, we should get to it, yes?”

“I know who you are, Jason Asano. I’ve heard stories and rumours. Are you as good as what I’ve heard implies.”

“Yes.”

Cassin gave a short, sharp nod, then held out a small, ovoid crystal.

“Magic map of the complex. You have a mapping ability?”

Jason took the crystal, which immediately dissolved in his hand.

“I do.”

“Please find my son.”

Jason pushed the hood back to reveal his face.

“I’ll do my best, Lord Amouz. And my best is pretty bloody good.”

Moments later, Liara was explaining the plan to the assembled teams, each of which was made up of guild elites, including the rest of Jason’s team. There was also a handful of portal users.

“Each team will have a map and an assignment,” Liara announced. “Team Scouring Wind will secure the dock while other teams have designated target locations. Seek out and secure base personnel while eliminating any and all opposition. Standing orders to prioritise capture if possible are rescinded for the duration of this mission. Put them down and get the people out safely.”

Liara started assigning target locations on a map of the complex projected from a crystal. Her assistant, Rodney, was distributing more maps. He handed out both magical ones like Jason was given, for those with navigation powers, plus projected ones like Liara was using, one per team.

“As you can see,” Liara continued, “the facility is extremely complex. Anyone with navigation power will fare better than those using a projected map, so follow their lead if your team has one. Those teams have been assigned the deepest target locations. Be aware that your magical senses will be significantly impaired. You’ll be relying on your eyes and your ears on this one.”

With a gesture, she expanded the dock area of the map.

“We have one portal user who can open a portal to our target location,” Liara continued. “This is the only location where portals will work. He will open the portal, letting other portal users through, who will immediately open more portals to let our people through. Be aware that there are hostiles who will know the moment the first portal opens, so no dicking around. Move fast and clean, the moment the second set of portals open because you will be coming in hot. My husband is one of the civilians we need to rescue, so if I see so much as a hint of guild rivalry nonsense slowing this operation down, I will personally execute everyone involved right here in this marshalling yard, is that clear?”

Without waiting for a response, she turned to Jason.

“Go.”