

Chapter 563

Keep it Light

The team was only one tunnel segment away from Baseph Rimaros, but that segment was filled with water.

“It should be fine,” Clive said. “It’ll drain into the hole we came up through.”

As Clive went to work on bringing down the next barrier wall, Jason reached out through Shade to contact Baseph. Baseph was still hunched against the wall when a new voice emerged from his shadowy companion, Shade.

“Lord Rimaros,” the voice said. “We’ll have you out of there shortly.”

“Who are you?” Baseph asked.

“I was a retail stationery assistant manager, and good at my job, until I committed the ultimate sin and testified against other retail stationery assistant managers gone bad. Retail stationary assistant managers that tried to kill me, but got the woman I loved instead—ow! Hey, that kind of—ow! That was right on the ear. What? I know I’m silver-rank, what about it? I should never have let you all listen in with voice chat.”

“Hello?” Baseph asked uncertainly. “Shade?”

“My name’s Jason,” the voice returned, now sounding sullen. “Don’t worry, mate; we’ll have you out of there in a jiffy.”

“Uh, I hesitate to ask again, but who are you? Adventurers?”

“Yep.”

“How did you respond so quickly to the incursion? Did the Amouz family guards get the signal out?”

“No,” Jason said, the amusement gone from his voice. “Unfortunately, the enemy caught them by surprise before they could. As for what did happen, that’s restricted information. Your wife might tell you, although I’m pretty sure she shouldn’t.”

“How bad is it out there?”

“We’re not sure. Communication is tricky here, as you know, but we came in knowing the potential for the facility to be sabotaged as a defensive measure. Preparations were made to save as many lives as possible.”

“I... I was the one who sabotaged the facility.”

“I know, Lord Rimaros,” Jason said softly.

On the tunnel section where the team was, Jason cut off the communication between himself and Shade, then turned to Humphrey.

“Let’s make sure he doesn’t see the floating bodies when we’re going back the other way, yeah?” Jason said. “This bloke’s aura has so much guilt in it he’s just about ready to crack.”

As Clive continued preparing the ritual to disable the wall barrier, Jason returned to his conversation with Baseph.

“We’re an adventuring team that is part of a comprehensive rescue effort, evacuating the complex. First priority is saving lives, and it’s a lot harder for the bad guys to break into the safe rooms when the tunnel in front of them is flooded.”

“Are we sure Jason is really helping?” Sophie asked.

“For the purposes of keeping that guy from losing it,” Neil said, “yes, he is. Lord Rimaros will be harder to deal with if he’s panicking or shutting down completely.”

Baseph couldn’t hear the others through Shade and Jason kept talking to help keep him balanced.

“Things have gotten a little complicated and we don’t have the resources to make it all the way back to the top. We’re going to get you out of there and then join the people in a nearby safe room. From there, we’ll wait it out until a more thorough recovery operation is organised.”

It didn’t take long before Clive told the group to brace and he dropped the barrier, letting the flooded section of tunnel wash out. The water level quickly dropped as it rushed past them, eventually draining into the hole leading down to a lower tunnel. Jason became shrouded in dark mist for a few moments, which cleared to reveal him in a white casual summer suit and matching Panama hat.

“Good idea on dropping the dark reaper of blood look,” Neil told him. “Everyone keep it light with the civilians. If we act like the situation is no great crisis, they won’t believe it, but they’ll be at least a little reassured.”

“Have you been taking lessons on mental health from Arabelle?” Jason asked him.

“No, of course not,” Neil said. “Why would I, a healer, take the time to learn about an aspect of healing from a gold-rank healer from my own church – of the Healer – with incredible expertise in her field. Of healing.”

“You said ‘healing’ quite a lot there. I never even noticed you were taking lessons.”

“It’s not all about you, Jason.”

“I did save the world a couple of times.”

“Which suggests you didn’t do a great job the first time.”

“I did my best.”

“Oh, I have no doubt you did.”

“That’s a little hurtful.”

“Did Humphrey and I start a thing?” Sophie asked. “If we’re all going to be pairing off, I definitely won out taking first pick. I really would have imagined Belinda and Clive happening before you two.”

“Life is full of little surprises,” Humphrey added as Jason and Neil looked at them in horror.

“Surprise biscuits?” Belinda asked.

“You just finished eating a gingerbread man,” Humphrey told her.

Belinda hung her head.

“Don’t give me that look,” Humphrey told her.

Clive was keeping his attention on the magic diagram he was drawing in the air with his power.

“Just so you all know,” he pointed out, “there’s a guy on the other side of this wall watching us be very professional adventurers.”

“He can’t hear us though, right?” Jason asked.

“No,” Clive told him.

“Then he probably does think we’re professionals.”

“Not in that hat,” Neil said.

“You wish you could pull off this hat.”

“Yeah,” Neil admitted wistfully.

Jason moved ahead of the group as they approached the tunnel intersection where Jason has sensed the gold-rank Purity converted. He extended his senses once more, as carefully as he could while pushing through the suppressive effects of the deep granite the tunnels were carved from.

“Nothing,” he called back to the group as he started heading back. “Looks like they moved on while we were digging out Bas, so we should be alright to move forward.”

“Bas?” Baseph asked.

“Don’t ask him questions,” Clive whispered conspiratorially, fully aware that Jason’s silver-rank senses would pick up everything. “Even if they seem sensible. You’ll find it’s best to let Jason wash over you and say nothing.”

“You make me sound like a packet of sensuous bath salts,” Jason said, rejoining the group. He looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodded. “I’m okay with that.”

“If he starts making sense on a regular basis, that’s when it’s time to worry,” Clive said.

“Don’t listen to them, Bas,” Jason told him as the group moved into the intersection. “They’re just jealous they can’t pull off a hat like mine.”

“That outfit does look good,” Humphrey conceded. “More of an outdoor style, though.”

“If you can convince the zealots to attack a beachside bar next time,” Jason told him, “I’m not going to stop you.”

“It would be nice to not be so busy,” Neil said. “Rimaros would be a nice place to take a holiday once the monster surge is over.”

“Seconded,” Jason agreed.

“Rimaros is a great place for that,” Baseph said. “The post-surge festivals here are world-famous.”

“That’s true,” Humphrey said.

Baseph’s brief smile faded.

“I’m not so sure how it will go, this time. Even buried under the ocean we’ve heard how things are going up there. I didn’t even see Liara after the attack on Rimaros.”

Jason frowned, knowing that Liara had been in the thick of it deep in the bowels of the flying city.

“These are dark days,” Jason said. “I’m a lot younger than you, Bas, but I’ve seen my share of dark days. If I know that they always come to an end, you must too.”

Baseph nodded, then his eyes drifted down the other unsealed tunnel as they reached the intersection. Two of the four tunnels weren’t blocked with wall barriers, both the one the team had originally come through and the one they had followed to retrieve Baseph.

“That way?” Baseph asked.

“No,” Humphrey said firmly. “Not that way. Clive?”

Something about Humphrey’s rigid denial had Baseph’s attention fixated on the open tunnel as Clive worked on breaching the next barrier wall.

“There’s something down there, isn’t there?” he asked.

“Yes,” Neil told him, not trying to lie.

“Something you don’t want me to see.”

“Our job,” Humphrey said, “is to get you and as many other people as we can out of this alive. You going down there hurts us more than helps, so I’m going to ask you not to go down there and also to not ask why.”

“Meaning that whatever is down there is worse than what I’m imagining,” Baseph said. “It’s people who died because of what I did, isn’t it?”

The team shared a look, and then Neil gave Baseph a nod. After a moment, Baseph nodded back.

“I think you’re right,” he said. “I don’t think I’m ready to see that.”

The safe rooms were more than just secure doors, although the ten centimetres of magically reinforced metal covered in dangerous-looking sigils were definitely that. Certain varieties of hostile magic were designed to look like explosive traps, from the design of the ritual patterns to the way they glowed. The sigils on the door slowly pulsed an ominous red, invoking the feel of staring down the throat of a fire-breathing monster.

The obvious choice when attempting to intrude was to dig into the room straight through the wall. Beyond just the doors, though, behind the stone walls, the entire safe room was sheathed in thick metal, laid with traps less overt than the door sigils but no less potent. The safe rooms were designed to live up to their name, and while very little could shut out a gold-ranker, even they would not have an easy time gaining access. As for a group of silver-rankers, the difficulty was considerably greater.

Baseph had destroyed his master key to the safe rooms because of the very real threat of being captured in the process of carrying out his sabotage.

“I’m sorry,” he told Jason and his team. “I did everything wrong.”

“You did something,” Jason said. “You have to at least try something to get it wrong. Better to seize your fate than just accept it. Better to die fighting than lay down and take it. I’m something of an authority on this.”

“I’ll try again,” Baseph said, stepping up to the door.

“You need to open up and let us in,” he yelled.

“No,” a female voice came back.

Baseph grumbled under his breath.

“People hiring their goddamn cousins,” he muttered, before raising his voice again.

“Dammit, Karen, it’s me, Baseph. I’m with a team of adventurers.”

“Then you should be fine,” she yelled back through the door. “Also, you could be a shape-shifter.”

“How would that help?” Baseph yelled. “You can’t see me.”

“Lady,” Sophie yelled, “you better open this door or my foot is going to shape-shift your ass!”

Baseph shook his head and stepped back from the door.

“I don’t know who put her in charge of letting people in,” he said.

“Clive, can you open this door?” Humphrey asked.

“Not any time soon, and not without damaging it,” Clive said. “And most likely damaging us worse.”

“Which would defeat the purpose of a safe room,” Neil added.

“What we need is Belinda’s expertise,” Clive said.

Baseph turned in confusion to look at a person he’d been introduced to earlier, along with the rest of the team.

“Aren’t you Belinda?” he asked her.

“Yes,” she said with a bright smile. “I like stealing things and recordings of oiled up—”

Sophie’s hand clamped over Belinda’s mouth and she firmly led her friend away.

“Do we try for another safe room?” Humphrey mused aloud.

“I’m running perilously short on ritual materials that will get us through doors and walls,” Clive said. “We could maybe reach another safe room and maybe not.”

“Plus, there are gold-rank bad guys roaming around,” Jason said. “I’m not sure we should even have been yelling like that.”

“Other options?” Humphrey asked.

“Gordon could break down barriers and through walls with his beams,” Jason said. “It would take a lot longer than Clive and his rituals—”

“Which are already quite slow,” Clive added.

“—but slow is better than stopped,” Jason finished.

The team were mulling over a selection of poor options when the sigils on the door dimmed and it moved back, then slid to the side to open. As it did, the voices from inside became audible.

“...no telling who they really are.”

“Andres, did I say ‘stop Karen from taking over’ or did I say ‘take a nap and let her run rampant?’”

“You were taking a nap.”

“I’ve been awake for... oh, hey, boss. Sorry about that.”

The team started filing into the room when Jason started wildly gesturing for them to hurry.

“Quick! Get in and shut the door.”

The team did as instructed, rather than question and the door was quickly shut behind them.

“Gold-rank?” Humphrey asked.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “It looks like they swung back around.”