

## Chapter 562

### Saving the Day With the Power of Quips

That the two gold-rankers sent to the underwater facility had been available was a stroke of good fortune. Claud Ferringhaas was an expert manipulator of water and stone, with his earth, water, shovel and verdant essences. He was an agricultural expert and only part-time adventurer, although his combat abilities were in no way lacking.

Amos Pensinata was pure adventurer, with the might, vast, deep and leviathan essences. He had spent the bulk of the monster surge handling the ocean monsters that were often the most dangerous in the sea of storms. Although he lacked the water essence his powers made him extremely comfortable in the depths.

More important than his specific powers was Amos' aura strength. Like Jason, his aura was oppressively powerful compared to others of his rank, and he stood a full rank over Jason. Also, like Jason, his aura strength did not come from being a fourfold with overlapping aura powers. Jason was not the only one to endure tribulations of the soul.

Where Jason could extend his senses through a room, maybe two, Amos was able to push his perception to encompass a third of the facility. He was also strong enough to breach the water-sealing barriers segmenting the tunnels through raw physical might.

After being updated on the status of the facility by Korinne Pescos, a plan was quickly devised to most efficiently find and evacuate the trapped facility workers. Supported by the silver-rank adventurers, the gold-rankers set out.

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Baseph Rimaros was in a dry chamber, having triggered the seal walls in a section of tunnel early to protect himself from the flooding and to await rescue. Until that point, he had been in a state of relentless tension. While sneaking around the complex, he had passed within arm's reach of capture more than once. The ramifications of failure had scraped his nerves like a knife.

Now that the sabotage had been carried out and he was relatively safe, awaiting rescue, the tension had left him and he sat, back to the wall, with his knees up and his arms clutched around them. He was numb in the aftermath, left with nothing to do but dwell on the ramifications of his success.

How many colleagues had died as a result of his actions? How many friends? Because of his sinister companion, Baseph now knew that a rescue operation had already been underway, perhaps even before he started. His desperate actions had not just been

a danger but a needless one. He had wanted to save people, but how many had drowned while being escorted to what would have been safety if not for him?

"It was all pointless," he muttered, almost trance-like.

"You acted in a manner appropriate to the information you had available. That is all that can be asked of anyone," Shade said. "I know a man who has done this and gotten it wrong, but he does not let that stop him from doing it again. In times of crisis, inaction is often worse than the wrong action."

"Do you think people died because of what I did?" he asked softly.

"Yes," Shade said.

"Innocent people, I mean?"

"Yes; the non-innocent have most likely survived. The best information we have is that the Order of Redeeming Light's essence users are silver-rank and well-trained, with their leadership at the very least being of guild standard. Many have likely been inconvenienced or trapped entirely but not killed."

Baseph's head drooped.

"It is possible," Shade continued, "that the order's forces made up of people implanted with purified clockwork cores are more susceptible to drowning but I do not have the information to confirm or deny this."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Baseph said. "Clockwork what?"

"I shall spare you the lengthy explanation but there is a device that can turn regular essence users into what we believe are obedient slaves to the Order of Redeeming Light. The best information we have suggests that this implantation can be done involuntarily, which would mean that these Purity converted are actually victims. This, arguably, could mean that they are innocent of the very actions they are carrying out."

"I didn't think mind control was possible, even with magic."

"It is not. It is, more accurately, a very comprehensive form of body control that includes the physiological mechanisms that comprise the ability to think. Thus, the body is controlled by a hostile force but there may be memories or personality traits that linger, depending on the nature of the transformation. Lesser vampirism and other hostile transformative abilities operate in this manner. The soul remains intact, but is no longer in control of the body."

Baseph looked up at the shadowy figure, curious despite himself as the explanation continued.

"Essence users make the most, and sometimes only, viable subjects of such transformations. Their bodies have already been altered to draw power from the soul to

fuel their abilities, a power such transformations rely upon. They cannot forcibly violate the soul, even with a complete transformation, but if the body is already able to harmlessly tap into the soul's effectively infinite power, it can continue to do so, even if the body is modified to use that power in different ways.”

“The soul stays intact?”

“Yes, but the body generally cannot be recovered once the transformation is complete, even if the soul is unsullied. In most cases, only death can release the trapped soul from a fully transformed state. I have seen this many times.”

“Was your soul trapped? Is that how you ended up a shadow person.”

“I have ever been a shadow, since my inception. I have no soul, strictly speaking, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that my true state is something akin to a soul. I was bound once, and made custodian of many souls that were trapped in hideous, transformed and – worst of all – immortal bodies. I then became the familiar of a man who released all of those souls, by slaying the monstrosities that they had become.”

“Why are you telling me all of this? Any of this?”

“Because you are in a fragile mental state and I am attempting to distract you. According to your wife, you are a curious person who enjoys learning new things, whether they are in your field of expertise or otherwise.”

“She told you that?”

“She and I spent an amount of time together over the last few days. I am a very good listener, although I do not believe that I excel at comforting others.”

“That,” Baseph said, “is an accurate assessment.”

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Jason dashed backwards, away from the wall barrier sealing one of the pathways in the four-way intersection. Aside from the one they had entered through the other tunnels were sealed as well.

“What is it?” Humphrey asked.

“I sensed something gold-rank. Not an essence user or a monster. One of the Purity converted, I think, but I pulled my perception back before I got a good sense of it.”

“Did it notice you?” Sophie asked.

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “The converted have poor senses in general, from what we’ve seen, and it’ll be worse in this place. I have to push hard to sense that far, though, so I wasn’t exactly being stealthy.”

“That’s the direction of the closest safe room, right?” Neil said. “The princess’ husband is the other way, so how about we go that way.”

"If the gold-ranker is one of the converted, we could likely handle it," Humphrey said. "Perhaps we should deal with it before it comes across someone that can't. As Neil said, the closest safe room is in that direction."

"That would make the someone that can't deal with it us," Jason said. "A gold-rank anything isn't to be taken lightly. If we had preparation, knowledge of its abilities and an advantageous environment, that would be one thing. Being stuck in a room with a gold-rank weaponised victim is another."

Neil tilted his head, tapping his ear with his palm as if trying to shake loose an obstruction.

"I could swear I just heard Jason say something sensible."

"But what if people need help?" Humphrey asked.

"Then we hope the gold rankers get to them in time," Jason said. "They almost certainly have arrived by now. Humphrey, listen to someone who has sacrificed his life more than once to help people. You have to know when you're walking up to the line and when you're stepping over. Going after that gold-rank converted would be way over, even if it were alone. Which it isn't"

"We're here to save the lives we can," Clive agreed, "not to throw more away over the ones we can't."

Jason looked at Humphrey's face, filled with frustrated reluctance. He stepped in front of him and put a hand on his shoulder, looking him square in the eye.

"I know what you're feeling," Jason said. "Something inside you is screaming that it can win if you want it enough. But it can't. Believe me. I've been *through this and worse*. Every person you can't save will be a scavenger gnawing at your gut and there's nothing you can do about that. You save the ones you can, regret the ones you can't and let them drive you to get stronger. Then, the next time, you can save more."

Jason gave Humphrey a sad smile. In his eyes, the big man was a silver-age comic hero, complete with wedge-shaped torso and a jaw so square it could be mortared into a wall. He did not do well stuck in a crappy, grimdark reboot. If Jason's time on Earth had taught him anything, it was that if you let the darkness take hold of you, it wouldn't stop pulling you down. There were worse things than saving the day with the power of quips.

"Come on," Jason told him. "The beautiful princess might be too strong to get captured in the first place, but her husband could use a storybook hero."

Jason slapped Humphrey's enormous bicep.

"That's you, bloke."

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The gold-rankers moved separately, undertaking different tasks. Ferringhaas was using his water and earth manipulation to establish safe pathways into and out of the complex, making his way slowly down through the facility's levels. Amos was using his powerful senses to find more time-critical situations in which to intervene. He moved through tunnels regardless of their water level, the liquid impeding him no more than the air. The barrier walls slowed him little more than the water as he smashed through them like a bullet passing through layers of glass.

As he moved, Amos left behind a trail of lingering aura, a trick he had picked up that used pure aura control rather than any ability. It was imbued with an inherent hostility towards Purity worshippers while offering comfort to anyone else. Any adventurer would inherently sense its friendliness and follow it one way or another, either to safety or to Amos. Any enemy bold enough to follow it to the dock would find a gaggle of adventurers waiting for them, which would go poorly. If they instead followed it to Amos, that would go worse.

The various chambers and tunnel sections occupied by more than water were what slowed Amos' progress. Trapped civilians and adventurers he released were able to follow his path back out, although the waist-deep water troubled the iron-rankers. With the icy cold of the sea depths, it made for an unpleasant trip to the dock.

Enemies were a different story. Most of the safe rooms and enemies had already been cleared from the upper levels, so Amos didn't sense any until his perception reached the central areas of the complex. The enemies he sensed that were trapped he left alone, but if he found a roaming group, he moved on them. As Jason had pointed out, being in an enclosed space with a gold-rank enemy was not healthy for silver-rankers and Amos left Ferringhaas' direction to take prisoners if possible to others.

Sensing a group of adventurers whose auras told a story of trouble, Amos made his way swiftly through the passages, at one point smashing through a tunnel wall because it was only a metre of solid, magically empowered stone. He found a team of adventurers moving with one of their members on a floating magical gurney, covered in burns that left strange patterns on the flesh. The others were all various levels of injured, despite the healer working as they moved, most of them showing at least some sign of the strange burn marks.

A bedraggled female adventurer with scorched armour waved her team to keep going as he stopped in front of Amos to report, marking her as the team leader. Amos ignored her, looking at the man on the gurney as he gestured the whole team to a stop.

"Healing impaired?" Amos asked in a gravel slurry voice.

“Yeah,” the healer grimly confirmed. He was working on the other team members and not the injured unconscious man covered in burns. “Nothing I have works. Potions, abilities; I even have some ointment specifically designed for burns with wounding effects, but nothing. We stopped to perform a ritual enhanced ability; still nothing. I just don’t...”

The healer shook his head and went back to healing another team member with a green glow that emitted from his palm.

“We encountered a gold-rank pure converted in the lower levels,” the team leader reported. “It was moving with a team of Purity essence users. We drove them off, or maybe they drove us off; I’m not sure at this point. We managed to kill one of the essence users, but they got one of ours and...”

She turned to look at the unconscious man as if moving her head was physically hard, mouth trembling as her face filled with impotent rage and creeping shame.

“...probably a second.”

“No,” Amos said, pulling a potion vial not from his belt in which they were lined up but from a dimensional pouch at his belt. The vial glowed brightly with blue, gold and silver light.

“Is that a superior miracle potion?” the healer asked, looking on in awe.

“Greater,” Amos said.

“Greater?” the team member being healed exclaimed. “Do you know what that’s worth?”

Amos glanced at the man, his square brick of a face etched with disdain before turning back to the unconscious man.

“Not as much as this,” he said and shoved the unconscious man’s mouth open with his fingers before pouring in the vial and then clamping the mouth shut with his hand.

The result was immediate as transcendent light started shining from within. The strange burn marks started to fade, dissolving into rainbow smoke that formed a noxious cloud over the gurney. The team backed off while Amos ignored it, his eyes locked onto the man who was glowing with increasingly bright light.

After the light dimmed, they saw the man on the gurney stirring but still unconscious. There was no injury they could see remaining, although the blood, grime and tattered clothes showed that there had been plenty. Just as the light faded to nothing, another light shone from his body, this one silver.

“Gift transfiguration?” the healer muttered. “Lord Pensinata, this man is going to owe you deeply.”

“And I’ll collect,” Amos said. “There’s always work to be done.”