

## Chapter 552

### Criteria

A portal power at Jason's current rank of silver four had a base range of two-thousand and four-hundred kilometres, which was true for every portal or long-range teleport ability. Jason was able to eke out some extra range because of the various effects connecting him to the astral, although it was relatively marginal and he hadn't tested just how far he could push the limit. It wasn't a match for a true portal specialist but was close to the upper end of what celestines could accomplish. Like Jason, they had an affinity for dimensional energies that likewise made them naturally adept with dimensional powers.

Jason's normal shadow jump range was line of sight. When moving from one Shade body to another, however, he could travel at long-range teleportation distances, albeit at the range for a teleport power a full rank lower than normal. This was unimpressive on its own except for two key factors. Jason's shadow jump didn't have a cooldown, which was exceptional enough, but insignificant compared to the second benefit. So long as there was a Shade body at the destination, Jason did not need to have been to that destination before.

The need to teleport to known locations was, along with range, one of the iconic restrictions on portal travel. It was arguably the most widely known essence ability restriction of all. While abilities that extended range were common enough amongst portal users, circumventing the need to visit a destination was significantly harder. Jason's ability to do so may have been at less than a tenth of his normal portal range, yet remained noteworthy enough that he had been very careful about letting anyone know. He was relatively certain that even Soramir remained unaware of it.

Liara did feel better after her talk with Jason. He was younger than her children but the similarity of their experiences gave them a shared empathy that helped Liara cope. When it wasn't possible to fix a situation, at least not immediately, it felt good having someone who could truly understand and didn't make a futile attempt to fix it.

After returning to Livaros, Liara immediately cancelled Sophie's contract, as promised. She notified the Adventure Society and the civic authorities about the people in the city of Casallini and orders were immediately sent to deploy forces. Liara was a princess, if only of a minor branch of the royal family, while also being a high-level Adventure Society official. When she suggested a course of action, people took the request seriously and acted on it quickly.

After that was done, Liara returned to her temporary office. Her assistant, Rodney, was in the outer office, sorting through reports of suspected Purity activity to deliver to her later.

“Rodney, contact Cassin Amouz and ask for another meeting. Let him know that I’ll come to him and that I intend to apologise for my behaviour during our meeting.”

“With respect, Lady Liara, are you certain. I couldn’t help but overhear your rather loud discussion with Lord Amouz and he was definitely attempting to make inappropriate use of his influence.”

“His son is in the hands of zealots known for performing weird rituals on people,” Liara said. “If it were one of my sons, I’d burn this building to the ground if there was even a chance it would help bring him back to me. What Lord Amouz needs is to know that everything that can be done is being done. Otherwise, he’ll do something drastic.”

“Like burn this building to the ground,” Rodney said, realisation dawning on his expression.

“Exactly. So, I’d appreciate you setting up that meeting sooner, rather than later.”

“Of course, Lady Liara.”

Liara entered the inner office. The desk had been repaired from where she smashed it but all the books, records and other files had been piled on top of it in who knew what order. She sat down to start methodically re-collating everything.

Once she was done, she resumed the laborious task of poring over observation reports, activity logs, contract summaries and portal itineraries. The goal was still to identify the portal user responsible for extracting the clockwork kings from the Builder island.

During their conversation, Liara had consulted with Jason, as another portal user, about the one she was looking for. Like Liara, he had been present on the island, and with sufficiently powerful aura senses to get some idea of what happened.

They had talked through the specifics of what they had seen, and while Jason didn’t reveal that he had a trick to circumnavigate destination requirements himself, he pointed out that same ability in their unknown enemy.

Liara’s head was significantly clearer after taking some time to relax and get some of the concerns off her chest. She hadn’t slept since coming back from the expedition, or during the expedition itself. She was more than capable of enduring but that didn’t stop her head from feeling like it contained an angry swarm of bees.

Now with a clearer head, Liara realised that she should have recognised what Jason pointed out herself. Her inability to focus had cost her in concentration and the ability to connect information.

After reorganising the records, she resumed her search with renewed focus, making a list of essence users that met specific criteria. She based those criteria on what she and Jason had been able to sense during the Builder island expedition.

Liara had been paying special attention to the area around the forge room where the constructs were being created by Builder automatons. The chamber itself was impenetrable to aura senses, which also blocked portals. Liara had sensed the portal open outside the chamber and the clockwork kings and essence users that went through. That told her quite a lot in and of itself.

It had to be a gold-rank portal, and not just a silver-ranker's portal power pushed to the limit. A silver-ranker who had reached gold with their portal power specifically could only portal a single gold-ranker. Moving two gold-rank clockwork kings and silver-rankers besides meant a gold-rank portal user. Further, no gold-rank essence user's aura had been present. Even a stealth specialist like Liara would have needed to reveal her aura to use a portal power. That meant the portal user was not present and had opened the portal from a distant location.

This allowed Liara to surmise further things about the portal user. Unless the portal user belonged to the Builder cult, it was unlikely that they had ever been to the depths of the Builder island. For one thing, if they'd known the clockwork kings were there, they would have been and gone long before the expedition and not needed to distract the adventurers by sacrificing so many of their forces.

Another supporting factor was the fact that the Purity worshippers had gone down there themselves instead of portalling in the same way they portalled out. This suggested a condition had needed to be met before the portal could be opened. This reinforced the idea that the portal user had never been there, although the widespread destruction within the underground complex may have broken the portal user's ability to employ that destination.

Portal users needed to have visited a location before they could open a portal to it. The reason for this was that it allowed their senses to attune to the aura of the place, like examining spiritual landmarks. If a sufficiently drastic event severely reshaped the physical space, the spiritual space would often follow, changing it too much to serve as a destination until the place was visited once again. If a portal destination was on a

mountain, some diamond-ranker destroying the mountain would almost certainly eliminate the destination point.

Liara had sensed a strange burst of aura shortly before the departure of the Purity worshippers. She was fairly certain that it was some kind of aura beacon that had served as a target destination for the portal the gold-ranker opened from afar.

Liara was familiar with such beacons. They could be sensed in the immediate area, but also by linked devices from hundreds of kilometres away. Her husband had a similar beacon, based on the same basic design, as an emergency signal should he require his wife to come and save him. Fortunately, she had never needed to rescue him from anything more dangerous than his mother.

With Gibson Amouz in the hands of the Purity worshippers, Liara was worried about her husband. He was originally part of the Amouz family and was currently managing an underwater mining operation. Their marriage was more political than loving but she still deeply cared about him. If nothing else, while their children might be grown, she didn't want them losing their father.

The criteria she developed gave Liara a profile that she could apply to known essence users, resulting in a list of names. She started going through all the records she had on each name until she reached the end of the list. She was then left with a problem: none of the people on her list could have done it, according to Adventure Society records. Itineraries tracking Adventure Society members and reports tracking outsiders always marked the people on her list as either busy with society duties, confirmed as active elsewhere or on the far side of the planet.

That was not to say the records were perfect. Mistakes were made and rogue adventurers had many secrets. It really could be a Builder cult portal expert who stayed behind to assist their allies, or some completely unknown outsider. They were less likely scenarios as the details didn't add up quite right, but still possibilities. If that was the case, there was nothing Liara could do to find them, so she dismissed them as possibilities for any practical purpose.

Liara was betting that there was an issue with the records. The Adventure Society was the single most elaborate bureaucracy in the history of civilisation, making incompetence or corruption, more likely than not. She was confident that someone on the list of names, through luck or design, had their true activities covered up.

"Rodney!"

Rodney entered the inner office.

"I have arranged a meeting with Lord Amouz for tomorrow, Lady Liara."

“Great. Contact Jana and get her in here.”

“Of course, milady. Any preference on time-frame?”

“Now.”

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“Wexler,” Jason said as he popped out of her shadow. They were on a rooftop above the streets of the small city of Casallini.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I came to ask you the same question. Why are you in the city?”

“First, I came here to hand over the guys I captured to the Storm Kingdom forces at the border station.”

“That would have been at the border station at the city gates.”

“Now I have to sell the land skimmer I took off those guys. It’s a nice one; should be worth a bit.”

“You’ll have to explain this to me,” Jason said. “You’re saying that you went to the border station and handed your prisoners over to the border guards from Rimaros. That’s why you came to the city instead of returning to Rimaros, the way you were meant to.”

“Yes.”

“And then you decided to sell their skimmer since they were dead or locked up.”

“Exactly.”

“Did this land skimmer come with one of those specialised dimensional bags to store it?”

“No.”

“So, you parked it somewhere?”

“That’s right.”

Jason walked to the edge of the roof and looked down.

“Generously-spaced streets,” he observed.

“So?”

“So, I’m having a lot of trouble understanding what I imagine will be a key element to the scenario at hand. Namely that, if your intention was to sell off the land skimmer, then not actually taking it with you is an unconventional approach. Instead of driving the land skimmer to a dealership where they would pay you for it, you seem to have left the land skimmer behind and taken to the rooftops.”

“There are a lot of ins and outs to negotiation,” Sophie said. “It gets complex. Takes you places you didn’t expect to go. Like rooftops.”

“Does the bloody hammer you’re holding constitute an in or an out?”

The bloody-headed construction hammer in Sophie's hand went spinning out of sight over the edge of the roof.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she said.

"Sophie, you can't go after them yourself."

"I'm not."

"Or reconnoitre them."

"I have no idea what that word means."

"Yes, you do."

"Okay, I bumped into one guy, but he wasn't even involved. This is a lawless town full of crappy guys that will stop repairing their roof to attack the first woman that arrives on it."

"You landed on the roof of what was presumably his home," Jason said. "He probably thought you were trying to rob or kill him."

"I don't have a lot of experience with murdering people," Sophie said. "Killing, yes, but not murdering. Even then, I'm fairly certain that people who think they're about to get murdered don't lick their lips a whole bunch while talking about buttering up your flanks."

"Really? Okay, that does sound creepy."

"I've seen that look in men before. It's something that goes beyond want, through need and into something else. A hunger for something it's very wrong to be hungry for. I've seen that look, back in Greenstone, Cole Silva and the hammer guy both had it coming."

"We've all got it coming, Wexler."

"That's the truth," she agreed.

Jason opened a portal.

"Time to go," he told her.

"I'm not your nubile slave girl anymore, Asano. You don't get to order me around."

"I got to order you around? I should have done that more. I could have made you do my laundry."

"The cloud house does your laundry."

"It's the principle of the thing. Besides, I do still get to order you around."

"Is that so?"

"Yep. So get in the portal."

"What makes you think I have to do what you say?"

"You don't, that's fine," Jason said. "I'll let you explain to the others why we're having spirit coins for dinner."

"Well that's just playing dirty," Sophie muttered and made her way through the portal.