

Chapter 557

We Are Fighting Monsters

Jason returned to the submarine dock, again emerging from Shade's body, behind the high stack of crates. He immediately strode out from behind the stack, the opposite of hiding as his aura flooded out. Its oppressive presence masked the appearance of the portal that rose behind him, still hidden by the crates. Four Purity worshippers and twice that number of the pure converted immediately turned to look as he stepped out boldly to march in their direction.

The enemy didn't immediately rush to the attack, looking around cautiously for further enemies. Jason didn't rush either as he strode across the dock, urging his cloak to flutter around him, despite the lack of breeze. He drew his sword, the white sigil on the black blade turning blood red.

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- You have used conjuration ability [Blade of Doom] to conjure [Ruin, the Blade of Tribulation].
 - Weapon [Hegemon's Will] has prevented the conjuration, gaining all properties of the conjured weapon.
 - [Hegemon's Will] has gained the unholy, curse, disease and poison types.
 - Attacks made with [Hegemon's Will] now refresh any wounding effects on the target. Wounding effects refreshed by [Hegemon's Will] require more healing than normal to negate.
 - Attacks made with [Hegemon's Will] now inflict [Vulnerable], [Ruin of the Blood], [Ruin of the Flesh] and [Ruin of the Spirit].
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"Are you sure you couldn't find a way to be more dramatic, Mr Asano?"

"Not really the time, Shade."

"Perhaps a smoke bomb?"

"You see the people coming to attack me, right?"

"A background choir, chanting your name in slow, ominous tones?"

"You're hardly in a place to criticise anyone for—"

Jason didn't finish his sentence as he and the enemy reached each other. Jason's slow stride became rapid, darting movements as his cloak drifted around him, obscuring his form. He moved straight into the enemies' midst, surprising them as his blade flickered at the end of a shadow arm that moved in ways a flesh and bone arm could not. With more length and flexibility than his actual arms, the shadowy limb and the weapon it held were more like a sword-whip. They moved with speed and unpredictability but inflicted only shallow cuts.

Jason kicked one essence user into the water as he danced through the enemy, their clustered formation making it hard to pin down his elusive movements, but they quickly adapted. Some backed off, giving room to the others and themselves the chance to cast cleansing spells. They were well aware of who they were fighting and what he could do.

Jason didn't try too hard to evade their attempts to enclose him and he was soon encircled. He outstripped the enemies, especially the pure converted, but they swiftly recovered from the surprise of his tactics. What made them a surprise was their unsoundness, proven as he began struggling with their numbers in short order. A bolt of light punched through his cloak to leave a blackened scorch on his armour, while a converted's flame-wreathed sword bit into the flesh of his arm.

Just as it seemed they were dealing with an extremely ill-advised ambush, one of the order members who had backed off felt something through the aura Jason had used to blanket the dock. Five portals opening near-simultaneously was hard to miss, even while distracted by a surprise attack and a domineering aura.

She cried out to the others but it was too late. A figure launched from the top of the nearby crates, propelled forward by magic. Jason used his shadowy cloak to vanish as Humphrey landed in his spot sending out a shockwave that staggered his enemies. It only took them a moment to recover, but Humphrey used that same moment to swing his enormous sword.

Unstoppable Force was the most powerful single attack in Humphrey's arsenal. It was also one that no one looked down on just for being a common ability from a common essence. Not only did it inflict massive amounts of damage but a good part of that damage was resonating-force and disruptive-force, making it effective against any form of defensive barrier. It also kept going, affecting anyone that could be hit with a single swing.

Thanks to the people crowding Jason, who had vanished to make room for Humphrey, there were a half-dozen enemies within reach of his massive dragon sword. He swung it in a full circle, as much a club as a sword. Every impact triggered the silver-rank effect of the attack: a blast of concussive force that exploded out of the enemies' backs to slam into the others behind them, blasting them all away.

Two were sent flying off the dock and into the water. The pure converted went charging at Humphrey while the essence users called for them to stop, but it was too late. Humphrey's very common power made it easy to recognise, so the essence users knew that its bronze-rank effect was to reduce the cooldown for each enemy hit. Landing it on a half dozen meant that as soon as the converted were back in reach, Humphrey swung again.

Even Humphrey's most powerful attack, empowered further by his own life force and a boosting spell from Neil, was not enough to take down silver-rankers. Humphrey's low-rank days of one-shotting everything in his path were well behind him. His impact at silver-rank, though, was possibly even greater because anyone of that level was used to feeling a certain level of invincibility.

The massive life force within a silver-ranker made them extremely hard to kill, so the immense amount of damage Humphrey inflicted in moments was as much a mental shock as a physical one. This was much more true of the essence users than the converted, who weren't entirely drone-like but whose numbed mindsets lacked the imagination to be truly startled. Fortunately, they were the lesser threat.

Humphrey had gone off like a bomb, putting the enemy on the back foot or just their back as additional adventurers came tearing out from behind the crates where the portals had been opened. As the Order of Redeemed Light had done to the dock guards just minutes earlier, their sentries were overwhelmed by numbers.

Baseph gave up on reaching the docks to activate his beacon and signal his wife. He might know the complex far better than the invaders but their sheer numbers made the attempt too much of a risk. He counted multiple teams of essence users, as well as other people who were something else entirely. They were ostensibly people but their auras felt empty, as if they'd been hollowed out.

Baseph's aura was quite strong, being in the upper reaches of silver-rank. He would still need several years to catch his wife's gold-rank using monster cores as, even with their privileged station, the avalanche of cores required was not easy to come by.

His aura control was also solid, not just as required from a member of high society but also because of his wife. She was a stealth specialist with extensive aura senses and had trouble fully relaxing around sloppy auras. She had made sure that his control would rival most adventurers.

The result was that between his aura expertise and the sense-suppressing walls, Baseph remained uncaught, despite a few close calls. Once he realised that attempting to reach the dock was futile, he moved on to the next point of his agenda. Before he did, he stopped in a hidden spot to steel himself. It was a drastic step for many reasons.

Baseph had never killed anyone. He was an administrator who had spent his life running supply networks and high-value mining facilities. But if he initiated the complex's final defence systems, people were going to die. Hopefully, the invaders, but the odds were high that not all the surviving workers had made it to the safe rooms. Even so, he

saw little alternative. With no signal getting out, it would be many hours – if not days, during a monster surge – before anyone realised something was wrong at the facility. That was more than enough time for the invaders to find their way into the safe rooms.

Baseph balled his hands into fists and then relaxed them over and over, his eyes clenched shut. Finally, he opened his eyes and set out.

The leader of the mining complex rescue expedition was Korinne Pescos. Jason had worked with her team once before, although their relationship was not a good one. Jason, along with Vesper and Zara Rimaros, had been attached to an expedition with Korinne's team at a time when Jason hadn't been in a good place. His penchant for going off alone, his savagery and his dangerous, enigmatic behaviour had not enamoured him to her or her team.

As for Jason, the presence of Korinne and her team reminded Jason of Princess Vesper and Jeni Kavaloa, the gold-ranker who had led that expedition. Kavaloa hadn't been any happier with Jason than Korinne, but they had come to at least a mutual respect and Jason had quite liked her. She had been dumped with a scheming princess and a volatile head-case in Jason when all she wanted to do was her job.

Vesper and Jeni had died together, defending Rimaros from the Builder's flying city. Sacrificing themselves to buy time for the weapon that brought the city down to detonate, they were lauded as heroes.

Jason's feelings about the concept of heroic sacrifice were laced with confusion and guilt. He had sacrificed his own life more than once, sometimes knowing he would come back and other times not. He wondered for very much not the first time what made him deserving of such grace, over people who died for others in the full knowledge that they wouldn't come back. He always came up with the same answer, nothing, which left him unsettled.

Jason considered these feelings as he watched Korinne issue directions. It was yet another thing he would have to work through with Arabelle, he reflected, although he was increasingly ill-at-ease with occupying so much of her time. There was more than enough trauma going around and the church of the Healer kept her extremely busy.

"Why does she get to be in charge?" Neil whispered, still listening to Korinne. They were far from the only group talking quietly amongst themselves as Korinne issued directives, reiterating the assignments of the various teams. Silver-rankers were more than capable of multi-tasking their attention, so they didn't miss anything.

"No one would even know about this without us, let alone respond to it."

“You need the hammer to push in the nail,” Humphrey said. “That doesn’t mean you let the hammer decide where the nail goes.”

“What does that mean?” Neil asked.

“It means that in an expedition,” Humphrey said, “everyone has their role. You need to trust the leader, especially a hastily assembled expedition, and all these people know about us is what they know about Jason. Are they going to trust him over one of their own that they have known and respected for years?”

Neil looked over at Jason, who looked back and shrugged. He knew that their impression was probably worse than what Neil was imagining.

“Fair enough,” Neil acknowledged, turning his full attention back to Korinne.

“...and Team Scouring Wind will maintain control of the dock,” she continued. “As communication powers will not work deeper in the facility, we will be using scouting and stealth specialists as messengers and lookouts to keep in contact. This includes familiars from various teams to which you’ve already been introduced. We just overran the enemy here and I don’t want the same happening to any of our teams.”

“I’d love a look in those vessels the Order of Redeeming Light use,” Clive said, eyeing off the vehicles.

“So would every artificer in this room,” Humphrey said. “Priorities.”

“I’ll see if I can steal you one,” Belinda said.

“No, you won’t,” Humphrey told her firmly.

“Oh, yeah, absolutely not,” she said unconvincingly, nodding at Clive behind Humphrey’s back.

The teams only lingered in the dock for the few minutes it took to assess their environment and send out the first scouts, including Sophie. Korinne took the time to quickly reiterate Liara’s briefing before the scouts came back and the teams set out. Jason’s team had Jason’s map ability to navigate, along with Jason’s powerful senses and plenty of scouting options in Jason, Sophie and Shade. Accordingly, they were assigned to the locations deepest within the complex.

Shade had been scouting the facility since Jason released most of his bodies before the expedition even arrived and they were already reporting back to various teams regarding enemy locations and disposition of the facility personnel. This helped Jason’s team detour into the path of a group of pure converted, whom they made short work of. The team paused for a moment to look over the people they had killed.

"I think these poor bastards may be more victims of Purity and his maniac followers than anyone," Belinda said, then looked warily at Sophie, as Jason and Humphrey did the same.

"I'm fine," she said. Jason's aura senses let him know she was lying, as did Humphrey and Belinda's intimate knowledge of her, as lover and friend respectively.

Anger crossed Humphrey's face and Jason mirrored his feelings. Their anger hadn't been at Purity, in that moment, but at Callum Morse. Cal had arrived at the marshalling yard as the teams assembled and were about to depart when he dropped a bomb on the team. Of all the times to tell them that Sophie's mother was leading the Order of Redeeming Light, when they were about to fight them under orders to take no prisoners was about as bad a choice as he could have made. Sophie had put on a stoic face, showing no reaction at all, but she couldn't hide her turmoil from Jason, Belinda and Humphrey.

While they looked with concern to Sophie, Neil and Clive were fixated on the pure converted, transformed by the purified clockwork cores.

"Builder, Purity," Clive muttered bitterly. "They keep doing these things to people. When do we go back to fighting monsters?"

"We *are* fighting monsters," Neil told him. "And we're going to kill them all."