

Chapter 536

A Bland Kind of Alchemy

On the ruined island city that was once a flying Builder fortress, the adventurer expedition Jason and his team were part of regrouped. With multiple forces of Purity troops arriving on the island, the expedition commander, Liara, was changing their approach. As her primary concern was the safety of her people over the swift elimination of the enemy, she chose two basic doctrines for their response to the arrival of the Purity forces: simplicity and safety in numbers.

Avoiding any attempt at elaborate strategy, Liara decided on a simple and efficient approach. With unknown variables at play, she didn't want to introduce anything else to go wrong. The teams would go out directly to engage the enemy. As for numbers, she paired the teams up rather than let the six groups keep operating individually. That left only three groups compared to the five Purity landing parties that arrived on the island but Liara would rather take her time and lower the risk to her people. She strongly considered only two groups but there was only so much she was willing to let the Purity forces run around unchecked.

The teams were matched up to complement each other, so the other team with an affliction specialist was not paired with Jason's. She was a classic affliction specialist with an entire team dedicated to facilitating her powers. That group was paired with the most defence-oriented team of the expedition to further secure the affliction specialist. As for Jason's team, they were placed with a team built around reliability and efficiency.

They were much more of a generalist team than was the norm for Rimaros, but the local adventurer doctrine shaped them heavily nonetheless. Jason and Humphrey had been trained in the Vitesse style that valued a diversity of power while what passed for an acceptable generalist team in the Storm Kingdom was heavy on uniformity. Their team name was Work Saw, although Jason was uncertain as to why. None of them had any saw-related powers.

The two teams got the chance to see one another in action as they made their way through the city, clearing a path through the constructs they encountered. Team Work Saw's two front-liners had power sets that placed them in the same brawler role as Humphrey. As for the ranged attackers, they were all about clean, simple attacks. One was an elf with no stand out abilities but basic damage spells in every flavour there was. The other was an archer who specialised in firing arrows and having them grow larger mid-

flight. Rounding out Team Work Saw were a defensive specialist and a healer, both in the classic mould.

The power sets for Team Work Saw's ranged attackers were simple, clean and effective. Comparing them to that of their team Biscuit counterpart, Clive, was an encapsulation of the difference between the teams. Work Saw was all about simple, fundamental powers that were useful in almost any situation, while Clive's core tactics were built around preparation and sophistication. Team Biscuit's complexity hurt them with simple tasks but gave them the tools to handle unconventional circumstances.

Every adventurer who filled classic roles like ranged attacker, defender or healer had fundamental powers that fell within generic archetypes. These were the bread and butter of such power sets; simple, efficient and reliable. Humphrey and Neil, the most traditional members of Jason's team, had an ample selection of such abilities to go with their more unconventional powers.

The rest of Jason's team had more exotic abilities, to varying degrees. Jason, Sophie and Clive were each unusual variants of afflictions specialist, defender and ranged attacker respectively. As for Belinda, she was something truly unusual which, in many ways, made her the quintessential member of the team. All four were grab bags of strange abilities that required some combination of skill and judgement to leverage effectively.

This was the opposite of the Rimaros team. They didn't just possess a selection of the foundational techniques that were the hallmark of their roles; their entire power sets were built around them. This meant that individually they were not just unexciting but outright mediocre. They had no big finishers to burn all their mana on to close out a fight or seize the momentum in a critical moment.

Whoever had put the team together had either possessed formidable foresight or got lucky after putting all the problem cases together. Two or three such power sets together were a liability, but with six of them working in tandem, a bland kind of alchemy took place. Their accumulation of basic, efficient powers, combined with immaculate teamwork, crossed a threshold where, like a saw cutting through trees, their workmanlike tactics and enough dedication could turn a pristine forest into a desolate wasteland.

Both Team Biscuit and Team Work Saw were each categorised as generalists, but really they were specialists. Team Biscuit specialised in the one in ten or so monsters that were strange, extreme or both. Team Work Saw specialised in all the rest. They were not thought highly of amongst guild elites, but the Adventure Society loved them. There were plenty of elites looking to prove themselves against the oddities while very few of the top

teams were happy to take on the ordinary contracts that Team Work Saw went through like a saw blade through a tree.

The Builder constructs the teams were encountering on the island weren't monsters, but for most practical purposes they had the same traits as the middle-of-the-road monsters that team Work Saw excelled at. They weren't extreme in their construction, at least the mass-produced silver-rank ones, and they lacked any truly strange powers. Coming in reasonable but not excessive numbers, they were perfect opponents for the Rimaros team.

Jason's team fared worse. Humphrey and Neil did well but the others were using ten-dollar solutions to one-dollar problems because their power sets eschewed simple and effective abilities for potent but complex ones. As the two teams made their way through the city together the Rimaros team had started to take on an air of superiority. They were carving through enemies quickly and cleanly while Jason's team were using over-powered and overly elaborate strategies to accomplish the same thing in more time with less efficiency.

Jason used his ability to impede Builder constructs to help his team along but he did the same for the other team, not impacting the difference between them. He wasn't going to compromise the success of the mission over one-upmanship.

The leader of Team Work Saw, Carlos, took the chance to lord it over Jason and his team, but it was from a place of good-natured rivalry. While the Rimaros team had found their niche, they were still a generalist team in a land of specialists. Normally occupying a lower rung of the ladder, at least within the guild elites, they were simply enjoying a rare chance to have fun big-noting themselves. They were also well aware that their strengths and weaknesses were inverted for Jason and his team, neither dismissing nor undervaluing them.

Jason's senses got a feel for the Purity group ahead long before they encountered them. What he sensed alarmed him in several regards. While the presence of only three essence-user auras was a relief, the two gold-rank auras he sensed were deeply troubling. Even though they were not essence users, their rank was not to be overlooked.

The other concerning issue was the cores he sensed inside the vast majority of the enemy forces, including the gold-rankers. He could immediately tell these were modified clockwork cores. Jason's own experience in purging the Builder's influence from the magic door he absorbed and the World-Phoenix's influence from the magic bridge gave him unique insights. He could tell that an equivalent process had been used on the cores.

Jason immediately recognised that his ability to impede Builder magic would have no impact on these cores, purged as they were of the Builder's influence. He would need to deal with them the old-fashioned way. He opened up voice chat to share his insights with the expedition.

“The group ahead of us have been mostly created through clockwork core implantation but these aren't the cores we've seen in the past. The church of Purity have somehow figured out how to purge the Builder's influence, so while these are another form of converted, any assumptions based on the Builder variants may no longer hold. For those unaware, converted turn essence users into non-essence users of one rank higher. They are weak for the rank, with only a few powers, but the group ahead of us has two gold-rank converted and three silver-rank essence users. Other groups are likely to have a similar makeup.”

Jason's team was the first to get a good aura read on the enemy but not the first to engage them. Just as Jason had, the teams fighting shared information they learned about the enemy. The pure converted, as it turned out, did diverge in several overt ways from the Builder's version. One was that while their bodies were modified, it wasn't to the grotesque extreme of the Builder converted. The good news from this was that they didn't have the Builder converted's incredible resilience.

What the pure converted did have was a power they all possessed, on top of any other abilities they had obtained. The source of this purification ability was clearly the god of Purity. While that power might have been fourth-hand by the time it got to them, passing from the god to the purified clockwork king to the purified core and, finally, to the converted, a god was a god. Even a meagre scrap of its power, claimed like a lucky dip prize, was nothing to scoff at.

The nature of the power was especially relevant to Jason. The auras of the pure converted slowly cleansed any afflictions they or their allies were suffering, much like Sophie's aura was able to do. Their auras also seemed to negate boons on their enemies as well. What's more, the auras of the pure converted seemed to grow stronger by overlapping, which seemed to blend them into a single, more powerful aura.

Jason and his team found their enemies marching down a wide, cracked boulevard, upslope from them on a tilted street. Both sides moved immediately to the attack but it was their auras that clashed first, with Jason having the strongest individual aura out of anyone in either team or the Purity forces. Even the gold-rank converted were not his equal, their auras being the biggest indicator of their jumped-up rank. They were weaker than many

peak silver essence users in that regard. By merging their auras, however, they were able to outmatch Jason's, although it wasn't enough to suppress him in turn.

This meant that Jason could not suppress the enemy's aura effect, but neither could the enemy shut down his. The power of the combined enemy aura was more effective at suppressing the auras of Jason's allies, though, and he didn't have the spare strength to help them. The solution to that lack of power was the same as it always was: fight until he grew stronger.

Humphrey started issuing directions as both sides erupted into battle. The Rimaros team didn't have any powers as exciting as familiars but the familiars from Jason's team sprang into action, focusing on the mass of bronze and silver-rank converted. The gold-rankers and essence users were for the adventurers to handle themselves.

Stash turned into a marsh hydra as Onslow started pouring elemental magic into them from the rune shell powers he possessed. Belinda's familiars also went into action. Her astral lamp familiar, Glimmer, was a being that hovered around her like a magic item, replenishing the mana of allies while firing off force projectiles. Her other familiar was the echo spirit, Gemini, who was a living illusion that could mimic Belinda's allies. At lower ranks it had been purely illusory, to serve as a distraction, but with greater rank came the ability to mimic attacks using force projections. It copied Stash, turning into another hydra, but it looked like an underpowered hologram, occasionally blurring and flickering.

As for Jason's familiars, Gordon remained inside Jason. The extra aura strength he could provide was something Jason very much needed and the shields from the eye orbs were already intercepting ranged attacks. Shade bodies shot off, disappearing into the shadows of debris, buildings and his fellow adventurers. Colin, in his blood clone form, was switch-teleported by Clive. A confused member of the converted appeared where Colin had been standing and Colin appeared amidst the enemy, immediately exploding into a rain of leeches. The converted now amongst the team was immediately wrapped in vines by a spell from Neil. The thorny vines dug up from beneath the road, cracking flagstones as they emerged to entangle the converted.

Ability: [Verdant Cage] (Growth)

- Spell/Conjuration (poison).
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Silver 1 (77%).

- **Effect (iron):** Grow vines to restrain a target. More effective in areas already containing plant life.
 - **Effect (bronze):** Binding plants have damaging thorns.
 - **Effect (silver):** Thorns inflict poison. The type of poison is determined by the surrounding environment.
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The enemy was rushing to the attack, not standing around to wait for the adventurers to start unloading powers. The two defensive specialists, Sophie and her more traditional counterpart from the Rimaros team, moved to intercept one of the gold-rankers each. The remaining front-liners were the two brawlers from the other team and Humphrey who set up a defensive line. Because the enemy was so numerous, Belinda joined them.

Counterfeit Combatant was a power that, like her Instant Adept ability, altered her body and gave her advantages when using certain kinds of equipment. Rather than making her swift and agile, however, it transformed her into a tall, burly woman. She then equipped her heavy armour, spear and shield directly from her storage space.

Ability: [Bag of Tricks] (Magic)

- **Special Ability (dimension).**
 - **Cost: None**
 - **Cooldown: None.**

 - **Current rank: Silver 3 (03%).**

 - **Effect (iron):** You have a personal, dimensional storage space. You may equip any item in your storage space directly onto your person or unequip anything on your person directly to your storage space.
 - **Effect (bronze):** Weapons, shields and armour equipped directly on your person from your storage space gain a random boon.
 - **Effect (silver):** Weapons you equip grant you a special attack. Armour and shields you equip gain an ability in addition to any they may have already. The special attacks and abilities gained are of the same rank as the item.
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Both her Bag of Tricks and Counterfeit Combatant gave her powers appropriate to her current state and gear. Unfortunately, the aura of the enemies quickly cleared her bonus buff powers. The abilities she received were somewhat random and they didn't make her the equal of the other front-liners, but it was close enough to get the job done. As always, Belinda's jack-of-all-trades expertise was not in being the best at what she did but being whatever her team needed most.

With a frontline established, the rest of the adventurers arrayed behind them. Team Work Saw's ranged attackers were already firing off powers while Jason conjured his dagger and began loading up the vine-wrapped converted with afflictions. The healer from the Rimaros team stood at the ready while Neil set out a quick summoning circle. Clive was quickly setting out his own rituals, establishing the power boost he would need to start ripping into the enemy.

Chapter 537

Ideal Enemy

The Purity forces arrayed against Jason's team and their adventurer allies numbered in the dozens, although more than half were only bronze-rank. The key threats were the two gold-rank converted, the three silver-rank essence users and, to a lesser degree, the fifteen or so silver converted.

The powers of the converted were less bizarre than those of their Builder equivalent, without the body-horror transformations. Beneath the surface, however, Jason could sense that the cores inside them had caused more internal changes than was readily apparent. In terms of powers, most were predicated on producing flames or conjuring objects. In both cases, the fire or items produced were an ethereal silver.

The focal point of the battle was the two gold-rankers leading the way for the Purity forces as they charged down the broken and sloping street. One opened an aperture on his head, like the empty socket of a third eye. A stream of fire came spewing out of it and towards the adventurers. The fire was eerie, silver and ethereal, as if only an illusion. The heat pouring off it was very real, however, and it was tinged with disruptive-force damage, which was highly effective against most magical defences.

The defender from Team Work Saw looked like he'd come off a recruiting poster for defence specialists. Henry Xeller was a leonid and big even for his species, clad in ornate heavy armour, lacquered blue and gold with a lion motif. In one hand was a heavy mace, the stylised lion head matching his armour. His hefty shield completed the set, the lion's head image having its mouth open in a roar.

Henry held up his shield as the magical fire came pouring in and let out a roar. He had already evolved racial gift roar power that leonids possessed, and his version diminished the magic in area attacks. The silver flames became dull as the disruptive force they contained was diminished but the heat was unaffected. Henry held up his shield and the flames were sucked into the mouth of the lion head on it, preventing them from reaching the rest of the front line.

The gold ranker didn't let up, pouring out more of the fire. The shield continued sucking it in, the metal starting to visibly heat up. Henry was unfazed, not even looking at the heat glow of the metal slab strapped to his arm.

The other gold-ranker conjured translucent armour over her entire body. Despite having the look and coverage of heavy armour, it didn't slow down her gold-rank reflexes

at all. Along with the armour, she conjured a short-handled, double-headed axe into each hand. The weapons and armour both were wreathed in ghostly fire.

Unlike the first gold ranker, who stood back to spew out flames, this one charged in and was intercepted by Sophie. While the gold-rank converted had many lacking areas compared to an essence user, her basic attributes were not among them. She had the full strength and speed that demonstrated just how big a jump gold rank was even from the already formidable silver.

When all of that speed and power was brought to bear on Sophie, she didn't flinch. If anything, the gold-rank converted was an ideal enemy; one with the speed and power to push her limits without a dangerous slate of fancy powers. Instead, she just hit hard and fast, which Sophie was well-equipped to handle.

Sophie was normally the most mobile one in a fight but she let the converted juke around her as she dodged and blocked while standing mostly in place. She moved fast but on the spot instead of repositioning. The twin axes were a barely discernible blur as they came down on Sophie again and again, yet she was completely a match for the gold-ranker's speed. Both combatants were blurs to the people around them, with Sophie especially flickering like a figure in corrupted video footage.

Ability: [Between the Raindrops] (Swift)

- Special ability (movement, dimension).
- Cost: High mana per second and high stamina per second.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Silver 3 (17%)

- Effect (iron): Increased reflexes and spatial awareness.

- Effect (bronze): Increase speed through spatial distortion. More effective at improving short, erratic motions than straight-line speed.

- Effect (silver): Dodge using spatial distortion.

Between the Raindrops wasn't the only speed-increasing power Sophie possessed but it was the most effective for the quick movement of a duel. The silver-rank space-distorting effect was essentially the same as the one Jason's cloak picked up at silver rank, causing even hits that seemed to land miss. It was a difficult power to use effectively but Sophie had mastered it much more quickly than Jason.

Unable to outpace her, the converted attempted to take advantage of Sophie's decision to not run around by body-checking her. It did not go well.

Ability: [Mirage Step] (Mystic)

- Special ability (dimension, movement, illusion).
- Cost: Low stamina and mana.
- Cooldown: 40 seconds.

- Current rank: Silver 2 (81%).

- Effect (iron): Move instantaneously to a nearby location, leaving an afterimage behind.

- Effect (bronze): Can be used a second time. Cooldown reduced to 35 seconds, with a use regained every cooldown period. Attacking an afterimage creates a disorienting, short-lived, dimensionally distorted illusion space that traps the attacker.

- Effect (silver): Can be used a third time. Regain one use every 30 seconds. Afterimages and dimensional distortions fire dimensional blades throughout their duration at random enemies, inflicting sharp and resonating-force damage.

The gold ranker slammed into the afterimage Sophie left behind, becoming trapped in a spatial distortion that looked like a wobbly soap bubble from the outside, while the inside was filled with disorienting kaleidoscopic images. Blades of force shot off at other converted and while the gold-ranker was only trapped for a handful of seconds, Sophie made the most of them, leaping high into the air.

Ability: [Eternal Moment] (Swift)

- Special Ability.
- Cost: Extreme mana-per-second and stamina-per-second.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Silver 2 (37%).

- Effect (iron): Operate at a highly accelerated speed for one second of actual time, which is extended in subjective time.

- Effect (bronze): Time increases to 2 seconds.

- Effect (silver): Time increases to 3 seconds.

Sophie's Eternal Moment power was potentially her strongest, but also her least exciting to rank up. It was incredibly formidable nonetheless, giving her critical time to act.

In the air above the battle, she accelerated her personal time stream until everything around her seemed to freeze in place.

By this point, the frontline was a mess of converted and adventurers, lined up and clashing on the street. Sophie fired off a rapid stream of attacks with her Wind Blade power, the blades freezing in place until she slowed back down into the normal flow of time. She aimed the blades into the crowd of converted, not at the one she was fighting.

Ability: [Wind Blade] (Wind)

- Special attack.
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Silver 2 (97%).

- Effect (iron): Create a cutting projectile of air.

- Effect (bronze): Blades increase in length while travelling and track targets.

- Effect (silver): Blades explode on impact, detonating a horizontal ring of cutting force from each penetrated enemy.

Sophie's power wreaked havoc amongst the enemy as time unfroze. It wasn't especially powerful, although it didn't feel that way to the bronze-rank converted. It served as more of a distraction to the silver-rankers, while acting as chum in the water for the leech swarm amongst them as Sophie's power drew blood.

Dropping back in front of the gold-ranker just as she was freed from the illusion space, axe blows once more rained down on Sophie. Most of them were not dodged, Sophie instead choosing to block them directly. She didn't use weapons of her own, intercepting attacks mostly with her hands, forearms and shins, but with whatever worked – even her head. So long as she was actively intercepting the attack, her power took effect.

Ability: [Immortal Fist] (Mystic)

- Special ability (magic).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Silver 3 (21%).

- Effect (iron): Unarmed attacks deal additional resonating-force damage, which is highly effective against physical defences. Suffer no damage from making unarmed

strikes against objects and negate all damage from actively intercepted attacks. Not all damage from very powerful attacks will be negated.

- Effect (bronze): Gain an instance of [Momentum] when intercepting physical attacks.
- Effect (silver): Damage increases with each blow when making rapid, consecutive attacks.
- [Momentum] (boon, magic, stacking): When making an attack, all instances are consumed to inflict resonating-force damage. Multiple instances can be accumulated and instances are lost quickly while not moving.

Immortal Fist was one of Sophie's signature abilities and the one that allowed her to intercept weapons with her bare hands. As it ranked up it gave her a couple of options to enhance her weak attacks, either by saving up for a big hit using the momentum buff or by rapid-firing attacks. Against the fast and tough gold-ranker, she chose not to counterattack, saving up for a big hit.

While the gold-ranker's powers were largely straightforward, that did not mean she was without additional tricks. Every time Sophie intercepted an attack, the silver fire wreathing the weapons attempted to crawl onto her body.

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- You have been afflicted with [Cleansing Flame].
 - Ability [Radiant Fist] has negated the application of [Cleansing Flame].

Sophie's unarmed fighting style wouldn't work if she was subjected to the deleterious effects of every object she touched. The other ability that was quintessential her fighting style helped shield her from such effects.

Ability: [Radiant Fist] (Mystic)

- Special ability (magic).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Silver 2 (37%).
- Effect (iron): Unarmed attacks deal additional disruptive-force damage, which is highly effective against magical defences and intangible or incorporeal enemies. Unarmed attacks do not trigger retaliation effects. Negate any non-damage effects from actively intercepted attacks.
- Effect (bronze): Gain an instance of [Impervious] when intercepting non-physical attacks. Gain mana when intercepting magical projectiles.

- **Effect (silver):** After intercepting a magical projectile you may make a disruptive-force projectile attack.
 - **[Impervious] (boon, magic, stacking):** Resistances are increased and damage reduction is gained against non-physical damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
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A major deficit of Sophie's power set was the lack of simple, high-impact abilities. Her few big-ticket powers required specific circumstances, extensive set-up or both. The vast majority of Sophie's powers were minor effects that required high levels of skill to leverage. Fortunately, she had a power that offered a comprehensive enhancement to this style by enhancing many of those minor effects.

Ability: [Child of the Celestial Wind] (Wind)

- **Special Ability (dimension, holy).**
 - **Cost: None**
 - **Cooldown: None.**
 - **Current rank: Silver 2 (76%).**
 - **Effect (iron):** Your celestine racial powers have increased effect. You gain damage reduction to disruptive-force damage.
 - **Effect (bronze):** All your dimension and wind-related abilities have increased effect. You have increased resistance to dimension and wind-based effects and enemies subjected to your wind-related abilities suffer disruptive-force damage.
 - **Effect (silver):** Boons with maximum effect thresholds have their maximum thresholds increased.
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Sophie was never going to be a damage powerhouse, but her offensive ability escalated just enough with each rank that she was never safe to ignore. Key to this was the nature of the damage she inflicted, which was a combination of resonating and disruptive force. These damage types excelled at penetrating physical and magical defences respectively, which was highly relevant against the gold-ranker.

The conjured armour of the converted Sophie was fighting proved to be an excellent defensive measure against conventional forms of attack, even magical ones. This was true not just for the gold-ranker but also for the lower-ranked converted with similar powers. The ranged attackers on the adventurer side, pouring attacks into the enemy, were finding that their efforts against the armoured enemies were being shrugged off.

The armour was so effective because it integrated magic and physical defences with high efficacy. Breaching it effectively required either a massive amount of damage or a

combination of damage types that could weaken both aspects. This was another reason that the enemy was a perfect fit for Sophie, who was building up to break her opponent's armour and expose it to the adventurer's attacks.

Sophie's approach to combat, in spite of her speed, was to take it slow. The early stages of the fight were when she was weakest, so she treated battles as a marathon more than a sprint. The longer a battle went on, the harder she was to kill, the faster she healed and the more her damage went from weak but penetrative to a major threat. She also become more and more dangerous not just to fight against, but to stop fighting against once started.

Ability: [Karmic Warrior] (Balance)

- Special Ability (healing, recovery)
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Silver 3 (20%).

 - Effect (iron): Gain an instance of [Agent of Karma] when subjected to damage or any harmful effect, even if the damage and/or effect was wholly negated.

 - Effect (bronze): Gain an instance of [Good Karma] when healing others, cleansing others or suffering damage. Enemies that attack or take offensive actions against you are inflicted with [Bad Karma]. So long as any enemy has an instance of [Bad Karma], you have [Karmic Sacrifice].

 - Effect (silver): When an enemy with [Bad Karma] dies or is destroyed, your cooldowns are reduced for each instance of [Good Karma] you have.

 - [Agent of Karma] (boon, holy): Bonus to the [Power] and [Spirit] attributes. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, up to a maximum threshold.

 - [Bad Karma] (affliction, retributive, holy): Suffer a small amount of retributive, transcendent damage when making an attack or other offensive action against anyone without the [Karmic Sacrifice] boon. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, up to a maximum threshold.

 - [Good Karma] (boon, holy, stacking): Bonus to [Recovery]. Damage from enemies with [Bad Karma] is reduced. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, up to a maximum threshold.

 - [Karmic Sacrifice] (boon, holy, heal-over-time): Gain an ongoing healing effect, with strength determined by the amount of [Good Karma] you have accrued. This effect immediately ends if there are no enemies suffering from [Bad Karma].
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Karmic Warrior was one of Sophie's most impactful powers, although even that was a slow burn, accumulating over time. The gold-rank converted were trump cards for the Purity forces but this particular converted had been stopped dead by Sophie and effectively deleted from the fight as it failed to make any inroads in taking her down. Even worse, the bad karma affliction it accumulated attacking Sophie meant that attacking anyone else was a bad idea.

The gold-ranker could instinctively sense the nature of the bad karma effect. If she attacked anyone but Sophie, now, she would suffer retribution damage. Even worse, the damage would be transcendent, completely ignoring any defences she possessed. She was stuck facing Sophie until one of them went down and Sophie was on the opposite of her last legs. With every passing moment, she was growing stronger.

Chapter 538

Trying to Kill Jason Again

Sophie had one of the gold-rank converted bound up in personal combat. The gold-rankers were the primary threat to the adventurers, so keeping them occupied while the adventurers took down the rest of the Purity forces was critical. Sophie had managed to box hers up effectively but she had the advantage of an enemy that lacked area attacks. The other gold-rank converted was more trouble.

Spewing fire from an orifice on his forehead, like the empty socket for a third eye, was the signature move of the other gold-rank converted. It could also condense the flames into flaming fists the size of a human torso. It flung the fists, which battered the converted's enemies before exploding.

The capacity for area attacks made the other gold-rank converted harder to contain. It was Team Work Saw's dedicated defender, Henry, who took on that task. Compared to Sophie he was a defence specialist in the classic mode, built around enduring hits. His essence combination of iron, might and gathering gave him the prison confluence. The resulting power set combined a powerful defence with control effects that could bind enemies, lock down their abilities and even use their powers to fuel his own. He could increase the cooldowns of enemy powers, whether they were essence abilities or not, as well as shield allies from area attacks. He could absorb the energy of many such attacks, storing it until he unleashed it back on his enemies.

As the gold-ranker was attacking from range, Henry took the battle to him. Chains broke through the ground to bind the converted, and while they didn't hold him for long, it was enough for Henry to close the distance, barrelling aside less powerful enemies with his leonid strength. The lesser foes he could leave to the brawlers making up the rest of the defensive line.

Like the rest of Team Work Saw, Henry was a typical but elite combatant. He lacked the kind of powers that Jason's team leveraged to realign the entire paradigm of a battle, but his fundamentals were rock solid. His abilities were all about taking hits, shielding others or offering impediments to enemies that were minor, yet critical if used well. As the one responsible for keeping his team safe, he understood the price of mistakes.

Like most traditional defence specialists, Henry's combat style was heavily reliant on his armour and shield. They were not only of the finest quality but also reinforced by abilities from his iron essence. The efforts of Sophie and Henry gave the rest of their

teams the freedom to take the fight to the remaining Purity forces, but the problems of rank disparity were putting increasing pressure on Henry.

Compared to Sophie's enemy, whose powers were primarily defensive with the conjured armour, the powers of Henry's opponent were focused on attacking. As superb as Henry's armour was, it was still a suit of silver-rank armour suffering gold-rank attacks. The strain was beginning to show as it accumulated dents and scorch marks.

Henry was far from on the brink of collapse, still holding the line admirably, but was appreciative when assistance arrived. While the front-liners staved off the charging Purity forces, the adventurers behind weren't slacking off. Neil had been summoning up his chrysalis golem, a crystalline behemoth that lumbered forward to take some of the pressure off the beleaguered defensive line.

The other back-liners hadn't been idle, either. While Jason, Neil and Clive were making preparations, the ranged attackers from the Rimaros team were already at work. They had been hammering powers into the wave of onrushing enemies from the instant the battle began, taking as much pressure off the frontline as they could.

While Neil was summoning his golem, Clive was laying out the enhancement rituals that would supercharge his wand and staff attacks. Jason was standing in front of the enemy Clive had teleported into the backline as the battle first began and Neil had tied up in vines. Jason rapidly dosed the helpless converted with afflictions as she struggled to escape.

➤ [Pure Converted] has attempted to cleanse sin. Cleanse effect has failed.

When Jason had faced a trio of Purity adherents alone, their powers had been well-suited to counter his afflictions. Even so, Jason had been hurting them quite a lot until bad timing, bad choices and being outnumbered three to one proved too much. The reason that his afflictions had gained traction in that fight, despite their cleansing powers, was that Jason was not an unresisting victim of his powers being cleansed.

Amongst Jason's growing list of afflictions were several that were specifically focused on interacting with cleanse effects. While many power sets dabbled in afflictions, these were the kinds of effects that were the hallmark of affliction specialists.

➤ [Penitence] (affliction, holy): Subject gains an instance of [Penance] for each curse, disease, poison or unholy effect that is cleansed from them.

- [Persecution] (affliction, curse, stacking): Subject gains resistance to incoming boon, recovery, cleanse and heal-over-time effects. These resistances cannot be voluntarily lowered. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 - [Price of Absolution] (affliction, holy): Subject suffers transcendent damage for each instance of [Sin] cleansed from them.
-

Jason's afflictions were enough to trouble even Purity loyalists with no shortage of cleansing powers. It hadn't been enough to beat three prepared essence users of equal rank but it had certainly given them more trouble than they had been anticipating. Those had been Purity's elite troops; essence users dedicated to the god of purification. The converted were merely the god's foot soldiers, many conscripted against their will. While they also had an innate cleansing power through their shared aura, it wasn't enough to shut Jason's powers down.

- You have inflicted [Harbinger of Doom] on [Pure Converted].
 - [Pure Converted] has resisted.
 - [Harbinger of Doom] does not take effect.
-

It wasn't enough to *completely* shut Jason's powers down.

Jason muttered grouchily as the eye orb he sent into the converted's body failed to trigger the butterfly-producing affliction that would spread his other maledictions. He sent the second of the two orbs floating around him to sink into the converted.

- You have inflicted [Harbinger of Doom] on [Pure Converted].
-

Blue and orange butterflies immediately began to manifest on the converted.

"Better," Jason said to himself with a nod. "Clive, you're good to send this one back."

"Sure thing," Clive said and cast a spell.

Ability: [Juxtapose] (Balance)

- Spell (dimension, magic).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.
- Current rank: Silver 1 (88%)
- Effect (iron): Swap the location of two allies and/or enemies. You must be able to see both subjects of the spell. If an ally resists or otherwise prevents the effect, this ability is negated but the cooldown is reduced to 30 seconds.

- **Effect (bronze):** Enemies affected by this ability take additional damage from all sources for a brief period.
 - **Effect (silver):** Enemies affected by this spell are afflicted with [Inescapable].
 - **[Inescapable] (affliction, magic):** The subject cannot be affected by non-hostile teleport or dimension effects.
-

The converted vanished from the middle of Neil's vines, teleported back into the midst of the enemy. In her place appeared another converted, immediately tangled up in the vines vacated by the one that Clive teleported away. The new converted was only bronze-rank and was completely helpless as vines wormed their way around his limbs, poisonous thorns digging into his flesh.

Clive was standing in a ritual circle on the ground. In his right hand was a staff with another glowing ritual circle attached to the end like someone had glued on an elaborate neon plate. In his left was a wand with a similar, but smaller setup. He rested the staff against the chest of the struggling bronze-ranker and explosive force erupted out, scattering the converted's chest over the street behind it and the wall of a nearby building.

Jason nodded at Clive, then vanished into a Shade body. Clive turned to look at the enemy where the glowing forms of blue and orange butterflies had started to multiply. He shared a glance with Neil before turning his attention back to the enemy. The Purity forces were coming at them down a sloping street, so Clive was readily able to shoot force projectiles over the heads of the frontline.

The initial stages of the battle had been a little hairy as half of Jason's team chose to hang back and make preparations rather than immediately engage the enemy. Team Work Saw had been doing most of the heavy lifting while half of Jason's team got ready, but once they were, the battle shifted firmly to the advantage of the adventurers.

Clive was an artillery piece. His already powerful staff and wand boosted by the power of combat rituals, what would normally be simple force projectiles were sowing chaos as they exploded amongst the enemy. Neil's damage-soaking golem helped stabilise the front line and Jason's butterflies were spreading afflictions so powerful that the bronze-ranked converted barely had time to produce more butterflies to spread before dying horribly.

The gold-rank threats were occupied. The adventurer's frontline was stronger than ever with the addition of Neil's damage-soaking golem, which at silver-rank could magically connect with allies and absorb their damage. The Purity force's numerical

advantage was largely neutralised by chaos in the ranks, courtesy of Clive's blasting, Gordon's butterflies and Colin's leeches. Jason was mostly waiting for people afflicted enough to be worth draining. The battle was moving from a question of achieving victory to waiting for it.

Another advantage swinging in the adventurers' direction was that with every converted that fell, their combined aura strength grew weaker. As the suppression force diminished, the adventurer's auras started pushing back against it and their aura powers started taking effect. This was another eleven auras joining Jason's in offering boosts to the two teams. From enhanced attributes to mana recovery rates, the accumulated effects represented a jump in power; arguably the greatest strength of adventurers acting in number.

Jason moved amongst the increasingly scattered enemy, a shadow flickering through their ranks with impunity. His magical senses kept him from the path of Clive's force blasts – mostly – and he drained the afflictions from enemies right before those afflictions killed them. With the bronze-rankers, already on the verge of death, it was enough to finish the job.

-
- **[Price of Absolution] (affliction, holy): Subject suffers transcendent damage for each instance of [Sin] cleansed from them.**
-

Jason's afflictions spreading to the gold-rankers was the beginning of the end and Jason sensed the three essence users in the Purity group trying to slink away in the fog of war. That did not work out. Once Jason's afflictions were on them, he was able to track their location perfectly until they cleansed themselves, which he imagined was their priority once they evaded the adventurers.

After what happened the last time, Jason wasn't going to take on another trio of silver-rank Purity adherents alone. It took only a quick comment over voice chat to get Humphrey teleporting into the path of the escaping essence users. His very immediate approach to damage keeping them too busy to stop and use the powerful cleansing spells they were increasingly in need of with every passing moment. With Humphrey threatening them from the front and Jason harrying them from the rear, neither victory nor escape was an option.

Jason did the cleansing for them, purging all the curses, poisons and other horrific things he had piled onto them in the first place. What replaced them were holy afflictions that started annihilating the Purity adherents from the inside out, except for the one who had suffered enough damage that the cleansing itself killed him.

Jason wanted the others alive, so he used the power of his new sword to remove the fresh afflictions before they killed the others.

- **Effect:** The wielder may cleanse all holy afflictions inflicted by the abilities and soul-bound items of the wielder from an enemy touched by [Hegemon's Will]. For each affliction cleansed, the enemy suffers an instance of [Hegemon's Mercy] and the wielder gains an instance of [Benevolent Hegemon].
 - [Hegemon's Mercy] (affliction, holy, stacking): The victim of this effect is subjected to a powerful suppressive force affecting all magical abilities. This affects essence abilities, innate abilities and item abilities. Abilities derived from external transcendent sources are affected more strongly. This affliction drops off rapidly when not within the area of the wielder of [Hegemon's Will]'s aura. Additional instances have increased effect.
 - [Benevolent Hegemon] (boon, holy, stacking): The strength of allied aura power effects overlapping with your aura is increased. This does not affect suppressive strength or resistance to aura suppression. Additional instances have increased effect.
-

Transcendent light flowed out of the two essence users and into the sword Jason was holding up over his head.

"Why are you holding your sword like that?" Humphrey asked.

"Fabulous secret powers were revealed to me the day I held aloft my magic sword—"

"Never mind."

In the aftermath of the battle, most of the converted were dead, aside from one gold-ranker. Like the two essence user prisoners, the gold-rank converted that had been fighting Sophie was now under the suppressing effect of Jason's hegemon's mercy affliction. That only shut off her powers and not her formidable physicality, which meant that her potent recovery attribute kept healing her enough that she started stirring back to consciousness.

Sophie resolved the issue by occasionally kicking her in the head. Humphrey looked on with general disapproval but remained silent for lack of a better idea. They could only wait for Jana, one of the expedition's gold rankers. After being notified of the capture, she was on route to take the prisoners in hand.

Carlos was the healer of Team Work Saw and also the leader. While the group was waiting, he was looking over at the field of dead converted they had moved away from, concern on his face.

"Does anyone else think that fight was strange?"

“What do you mean?” Humphrey asked.

“What was the point? They had to know that the odds of taking down two teams of guild-level adventurers were lean, even with those high-rank converted. Why take the risk? It’s not like we were hiding our auras but they didn’t avoid us at all.”

“It does make you wonder what the loose group of Purity people are up to,” Jason said. “That aura beacon they set off might not just be for escape purposes.”

All three adventurer teams had defeated the Purity groups they encountered. Two of the Purity groups had combined into a larger force, though, making for a much more dangerous fight. The adventurers that had taken them on had still won with the intervention of Liara and Jana, but the fight had been hard-fought and chaotic, spilling through streets and buildings, some of which were brought down by the conflict.

The fight was eventually one, but in the wild mess, some of the Purity essence users had escaped. Worse, they had taken three defeated adventurers with them, although the adventurers had been alive when last seen.

All the adventurer teams had been directed to hunt them down, Jason guiding them through his map power that tracked the captured adventurers. That was when some kind of aura beacon in the middle of the city had been triggered. It blanketed the city in a non-hostile but extremely pervasive false aura that prevented aura senses from tracking anyone. As Jason’s map power worked through his aura senses, he was no longer able to pinpoint the captured adventurers. It also had a diminishing effect on Jason’s party interface, but only made communication patchy at longer ranges rather than shutting it down entirely.

The powerful effect was not something the Purity forces would have been able to bring with them and was likely something they had known about beforehand. The adventurers postulated it was what had given them the boldness to act so overtly as they could use it to cover their retreat.

Once the beacon went active, Liara had directed the teams into search patterns while Jana moved to claim the prisoners that Jason’s group had captured. Jason’s group were waiting on her arrival before they joined the search.

“I think they’re up to something,” Carlos said. “Moving this openly, this close to Rimaros seems like a stupid risk. They’re not going to do it just for a few risky fights against adventurers.”

“I imagine they want something here,” Jason postulated. “Something they don’t expect to be left behind once our expedition is done, or they wouldn’t act while we’re still here.”

“They’re probably trying to kill Jason again,” Neil said. “Can I get one of those cake sandwiches?”

“Kill Jason?” Carlos asked.

“He and the Builder have this whole thing,” Belinda said. “The Builder won’t use his own people so he wants Purity to do it, but they don’t seem to be trying that hard, if I’m being honest.”

“They tried pretty hard,” Jason said. He pulled a large tray from his inventory, piled high with chocolate cake sandwiches, offering them to everyone. The local variant of cocoa beans weren’t exactly the same as Earth, which excited Jason as the chocolate produced from them offered exciting possibilities.

“Why won’t the Builder use its own people?” Henry asked Jason. “And why you specifically?”

“Hang out with him for a while,” Neil said. “You’ll figure it out.”

“Neil, what did we say about trying to be nicer?” Humphrey asked.

“I don’t know,” Neil said. “I was only pretending to listen.”

Chapter 539

Here to Steal

The commander of the Purity forces on the island was Sendira. She had separated from most of the converted in her group, leaving them on the surface to delay and distract any adventurers that found the entrance to the underground complex they were using. Only the other two essence users and the pair of gold-rank converted assigned to her moved with her into the underground portions of the city.

The subterranean infrastructure beneath the city had been devastated by the detonation of a weapon of mass destruction, collapsing the vast majority of it. Navigating to the location where the clockwork kings were producing more constructs would be difficult and dangerous. With most of the tunnels and chambers having either collapsed already or being on the verge of doing so, a combination of the right powers and the right knowledge was essential to traversing them.

Sendira did not know where Melody obtained the information she had about the island infrastructure and did not ask. She had faith in Melody and the priest, Laront, second only to her faith in their god. The information Melody gave Sendira was only part of the equation, however, as it predated the massive destruction. At best it gave her some potential entry points to check.

The real trick would be navigating the new state of the subterranean complex, for which one of the essence users with Sendira was required. Fila and Ramona weren't wrong in their assumption that Sendira wanted them under her thumb instead of causing trouble for Melody's plans. That was only a secondary concern to Sendira, who needed their powers to complete the task before them. Fila had a scouting power set, with abilities from the air essence that let her navigate by tracing airflow. She would be able to seek out viable pathways forward, saving vast amounts of time by avoiding dead ends. It made her ideal for navigating the dangerous underground passages beneath the city. As for Ramona, her earth essence powers would help assure their safety while exploring unstable tunnels.

The trio of essence users and their two gold-rank converted moved through the tunnels. They squeezed their way down half-collapsed passages and dropped through floors that had fallen into rooms below. Fila plotted their path forward and down while Ramona cleared passages so that more than a breeze could pass through them. She also warned them of critically unstable areas where they needed to detour or they would bring the roof down on themselves.

As they realised that they were genuinely needed, the suspicious attitudes of Fila and Ramona were tamped down, although far from eliminated. While they might be antagonistic over leadership within the Order of Redeeming light, they were, ultimately allies. Their loyalty to the order itself was unflinching and allowed them to work together. While not above a bit of backstabbing, they all understood that the enemy, ultimately, was an unclean world.

The gold rank adventurer, Jana, arrived to shackle the gold-rank converted that Jason and his allies captured. She took them away for delivery to a support platform floating offshore that was the base station for the scouts maintaining surveillance on the island. Jana brought with her instructions from Liara that Team Work Saw and Team Biscuit were not to join the search for the captured adventurers but to find and disable the aura beacon. The beacon's false aura was blanketing the island, disrupting senses and communication and hampering the search for the enemy and their prisoners.

They were the obvious choice for the task, given Jason's enhanced senses and insight into Builder magic. More importantly, they had Clive.

"Who's Reed Richards?" Clive asked as he listened to Jason.

"He's basically my world's version of you."

"And you know this person?"

"No, he's made up. He's kind of unrealistically good at all the magic. They call it science, but it's clearly magic gibber."

"Um, thank you?"

While a gold-rank stealth specialist like Jana could move safely through the city even at speed, two teams of silver-rank adventurers could not. With plenty of constructs still roaming around, they had to balance caution and speed. Slogging through pack after pack of constructs would take longer than carefully avoiding them, so they took a slow is smooth, smooth is fast approach.

The terrain continued to be complicated, with broken streets, collapsed buildings and whole sections that had fallen into the ground as the subterranean infrastructure below it collapsed. It left even the ground beneath their feet precarious, even if it felt solid. Humphrey triggered a ground collapse with his dive bomb special attack, pulling an entire building down on himself. He had been forced to teleport out of its path, but it conveniently finished off of the constructs he'd been fighting.

Jason's first thought had been to stealth ahead to the beacon himself and portal people in. His senses could pick out the source of the white-noise aura blasting across the

city but he quickly discovered that it also blocked portal abilities. After discovering this, the teams paused to do some experimentation.

Their tests revealed that short-range, personal teleportation like shadow-jumping still worked, but teleporting beyond line of sight or opening portals failed entirely. Anything affecting someone other than the person using the power also failed, including Clive's switch-teleport, even though it was short-ranged as well. Other dimensional abilities seemed to be unaffected, such as Jason and Sophie's dodge powers and the team's various storage spaces.

Team Work Saw watched as they tested Jason's teleport and storage powers, Humphrey's teleport and storage powers, Belinda's storage power and Clive's power that was both a portal and a storage power. They looked on with growing incredulity as Jason and his companions moved on to testing other dimensional powers, like Neil's ability to draw everyone into a safe dimensional pocket and set off wide area damage, or Belinda's dimensional pit full of death tentacles. Outside of the teleport problems, their abilities seemed to be working normally.

"You realise that a lot of teams will hire someone with a portal and storage power in their set as auxiliary members, right? They don't even make them fight."

"I think we're covered on that front," Humphrey said casually. Having tested his own powers, he stood with the Rimaros adventurers as they watched the others.

"You're more than covered," Henry said. "Three long-range teleport or portal abilities. I didn't even count the storage powers. Your travel needs are more than amazing."

"That's a point," Jason said, wandering over. "Should we check our conventional travel powers? I don't have the cloud bus but Shade has his vehicle forms and Onslow can do the giant shell thing. Stash can probably shape-shift into something, right? Anyone else?"

"I can take people with me when I fly around," Sophie said.

"I don't think we need to check any of that," Humphrey said. "We're on foot at the moment anyway. Carlos, why are you making that face?"

With no portal shortcuts, the two teams just made their way as a unit, quickly and cleanly eliminating any constructs they encountered and couldn't avoid. With the aura beacon stifling their senses, it was easier to stumble into enemies, with only Jason having any real range. Team Work Saw were the combat mainstays of the group, their clean, efficient tactics ideal for eliminating ordinary opponents.

"Our teams seem to complement each other well," Humphrey observed to his counterpart, Carlos. "Would you be open to further collaboration after this expedition is done?"

"We would," Carlos said, looking surprised. "That's not an offer we get a lot. We have one of the highest contract clearance rates in Rimaros, with a success percentage to match. Our contracts are looked down on as grunt work by other teams, though."

"It's teams like yours that do the real work of the Adventure Society," Humphrey said. "You and your team are the truest adventurers of all of us."

"I appreciate that," Carlos said.

"He means it, too," Jason said through voice chat, listening in as he scouted ahead.

"Yeah," Neil agreed. "Humphrey is cloyingly earnest."

"Well, I like it," Sophie said, also through voice chat. "He's not afraid to voice a sincere opinion without coating it in snide, unlike some people."

"Are you talking about me?" Neil and Jason asked at the same time.

"I think she was talking about you," Neil said.

"No, it was you," Jason retorted. "You're the one who said something right before. I should have kept my mouth shut."

"That's been true since the day we met, but even killing you doesn't get the job done."

"You might want to tell your team leader to reconsider that collaboration," Belinda confided in Henry, Team Work saw's big leonid. "We're not what I'd describe as a professional outfit."

"Who cares?" Henry asked. "You lunatics can portal in all the professionals you like."

"Are you still going on about that?"

"Your team has three portal powers!"

"Humphrey's is a teleport. That's slightly different."

"Not very."

"Also, I can copy powers, so I can technically use a portal power as well."

"I thought you could only do spells," Neil said.

"My Mirror Magic ability lets me copy other abilities since it hit silver rank."

"Oh, nice," Neil said. "You're really getting versatile. Hey, the other team is making those faces again."

Ramona was carefully shifting shattered stone with her powers to clear a path.

"The constructs aren't coming this way from wherever they're being made," she complained. "Why don't we find some intact tunnels."

"Fila isn't finding the path the constructs use," Sendira said. "For one thing, we don't want to be fighting through them to reach wherever the clockwork kings are. For another, they are likely using a convoluted but clear path. Fila is finding us something more direct. Hopefully, that will help us find what we're looking for and be gone before the adventurers stumble onto it."

"And all the other teams out there are expendable?" Fila asked.

"Except for the ones who kidnapped Melody's daughter," Ramona pointed out. "As soon as the grab team had her, Sendira couldn't activate the beacon fast enough. The members of the grab team that survived, anyway. How many was that, Sendira?"

"We are going to war with the entire world," Sendira said. "Sacrifices will always be necessary and we must be unflinching."

"And it's essential for the war that Melody's daughter be taken? It's no secret she's been using the fact that the boy the Builder wants dead is on her daughter's team to expend precious lives and resources on this."

"What Melody wants with the target is no concern of yours," Sendira said. "Your place is to obey, not criticise in ignorance."

Ramona finished clearing the way and they continued on.

Jason had been imagining some kind of lighthouse structure, but the beacon was located in a low, flat building remarkable only for being the least-damaged one they had come across. They found a set of large doors, discovering signs of fresh combat inside. Someone had fought their way in, taking out not just regular constructs but also emplaced defences. Giant metal arms, once presumably animate before their destruction, now dangled limply from the walls and ceiling. The damage was consistent with the powers they had seen from the converted, the silver flames they used leaving distinctive scorch patterns.

"The Purity people fought their way in," Jason observed as the group walked slowly and warily through the mess. "I don't think the Builder wants his allies here, picking over the bones of his fallen city."

"That makes their decision to act so openly, this close to Rimaros, all the more curious," Humphrey said. "What's worth exposing themselves this much?"

"If the Purity loyalists are here to steal," Clive said, "perhaps we should ask our resident thieves for insight. Ladies?"

"Don't look at me," Sophie said. "I did the running and punching and climbing up walls. All the planning that took place was Lindy's doing."

“Oh, you’re going to put everything on me?” Belinda said.

“If I was coming up with the plans, why did I always end up getting chased by dangerous people while you slipped away unnoticed?”

“Soph, you’re a stupidly gorgeous woman with silver hair who kicks people in the face when she gets mildly annoyed. What part of that suggests ‘slipping away quietly’ is the approach for you?”

“You did kick me in the face when we first met,” Jason said.

“You made my body wither and rot to the point that an alchemist and a healing priest struggled to keep me alive between them. And that was in a well-stocked alchemy clinic.”

“There were good people on both sides,” Jason said, his expression shifty.

“I think I’m going to kick you in the face again.”

“Or perhaps we get back to work?” Humphrey pointedly suggested. “Belinda, any ideas?”

Chapter 540

Not Really a Rules Guy

Belinda panned her gaze over the broken Builder constructs, destroyed not by adventurers but by the Purity worshippers that were their ostensible allies.

"I can only guess at what they want," she said. "Whatever they're after, they think it will be gone if they wait for us to come and go. Something that the Builder doesn't want them to take or, at least, didn't give them permission to. It has to be something valuable enough that they're willing to go against the wishes of what is – to our knowledge – the only ally they have. Valuable enough that they're willing to risk exposure and significant losses by sending this much of a force this close to Rimaros at the same time as a significant adventurer expedition."

She paced, absently tapping a finger to her lips as she looked around. The other adventurers remained silent, letting her think. Her eyes settled on the destroyed Builder constructs.

"Jason," she said. "You told us that those altered Purity slaves had clockwork cores in them, right? The same things the Builder uses to create his minions?"

"That's right," Jason confirmed. "They've somehow erased the Builder's influence and replaced it with Purity's, but they have the same origin as the Builder cores."

Jason's eyes lit up as he realised what Belinda was thinking.

"Oh," he said, sharing a gaze with Belinda. "Oh, I bet that's it."

"Care to share with the rest of the group?" Neil asked.

"It's no secret that the Purity church has as good as declared war on the rest of the world," Jason said. "They're preparing for a conflict, which means they need soldiers. While you were all operating out of Vitesse, you messed up their summoning of those messengers, but what if that's only one way they're bulking out their forces? What if they're trying to co-opt the Builder's method of mass-producing troops?"

"By using the modified cores," Clive said. "Is that viable without the Builder's cooperation? From the look of these destroyed Builder constructs, he and Purity's unlikely alliance seems to be on the outs."

"Which is why Purity's people are willing to take such a big risk here," Belinda said. "We know where clockwork cores come from. The Builder produces them with his clockwork kings," Belinda said, picking up the narrative.

"And we came to this island to destroy clockwork kings," Humphrey said.

“Exactly,” Belinda said. “We know that the Purity loyalists here belong to the Order of Setting Fire to Stuff or whatever they’re called. The ones that like to take things they consider unclean and purify them somehow, turning them into tools that they can use for themselves. What if they did that to a clockwork king to get the cores they have now? Maybe the Builder gave them one as part of whatever deal they made in the first place, but now they want to step up production. More clockwork kings means more cores, which means more fire-spitting mind-slaves for the Purity army. But what if the Builder cult won’t hand any more over?”

“Then they come for the ones here,” Clive concluded.

“But why wait until the island is crawling with adventurers to come get them?” Sophie asked.

“My guess would be they didn’t realise the clockwork kings were here,” Jason said. “If the Builder doesn’t want to hand them over, he wouldn’t tell them about it, assuming they even communicate at all anymore. And we have to assume that Purity has spies in Rimaros. They were a major church until just a few years ago; they have to have informants and sympathisers left. Maybe those spies heard about an expedition to wipe out some clockwork kings and that’s when they realised the kings were here for the taking.”

“Which would be why they’re here now,” Belinda concluded.

“We thought this beacon was an escape plan,” Humphrey said. “Instead, maybe it’s cover while they try and beat us to the clockwork kings.”

“How would they take them away?” Clive asked. “It doesn’t seem like the Builder wants to hand them over, so they’re unlikely to go quietly. Clockwork Kings are gold rank.”

“A question for later,” Humphrey said. “Liara is out of voice chat range at the moment, so let’s get the beacon down so we can fill her in, find our captured people and see about destroying those clockwork kings before Purity’s people get ahold of them.”

The two teams searched the building for the beacon projecting its disruptive aura across the island. The Purity adherents had trapped the approach but Belinda disabled each one with a running commentary of their “amateurish efforts.” As they drew closer to the source of the beacon, the intensity of the aura started to impact the adventurers. They all suffered from aura suppression and were affected by vertigo and headaches. Jason pushed his aura to the limits of his strength, barely managing to shield the others. One of the various traits his soul had picked up through its many traumas was the only reason he was able to resist.

Title: [Indomitable]

- Your repeated defiance in the face of more powerful enemies and willingness to sacrifice everything for a cause has marked your soul. Your resistance to aura suppression is further enhanced and ignores rank disparity.
- Your aura signature has changed. Your unwavering resolve floods your aura and can be detected if your aura is examined by an aura sensing power or when projecting your aura. Allies within your aura have increased resistance to aura suppression.

Jason's aura was an excellent tool for shielding his allies from aura suppression, but for all that his aura was powerful, its strength was not infinite. Against dozens of converted that could blend their auras into a single force, he barely managed to keep his own aura active. He couldn't shield his team from the purity-obsessed forces that combined their powers like a white supremacist Captain Planet. Only once enough of them died to diminish their collective aura was he able to push it back.

The aura produced by the beacon was stronger than a few dozen converted but it wasn't an actively hostile force. The suppression was only a side effect of their proximity and this time Jason was able to push back enough to shield his allies. It was a borderline thing, though, leaving him able to do little more than walk and concentrate on projecting his aura.

As their minds cleared, Team Work Saw felt Jason's aura enveloping them at full force. All of the power and strangeness that he normally kept hidden were on full display and they all turned startled gazes on him. Even Jason's own team hadn't felt his aura truly pushed as far as it could go and turned to look at Jason as his face was fixed in a determined grimace as he held off the aura.

"If we could hurry a little," he said through gritted teeth, "that would be really nice."

They moved on and tracked the beacon down in short order. It was a magical device similar to an orrery, hanging from the ceiling in a round room. It was made up of crystals linked by rods of brass and silver, with a large central crystal and around twenty more that got smaller the further they were from the middle. The central crystal was the size of a person's torso while the outer ones were no bigger than a fist. The larger crystals looked like natural formations while the smaller ones had been worked and faceted like gemstones. The crystals were in a variety of colours, from diamond-clear to muddy yellow-brown.

"Can we just smash it?" asked Henry, the leonid from Team Work Saw.

"We could," Clive said absently as he stood under the device, looking up as his eyes skittered across it. "The resulting magical detonation wouldn't inflict any physical damage, but it would probably feel like your soul was being plucked out and dropped into lava. It might not drive you insane and cripple your soul as your mind collapsed. Jason would probably be fine."

"In your own time, Clive," Jason said through gritted teeth. Being right next to the device was straining him to his limits. Clive worked with Belinda to examine the device using a few measurement tools pulled from their inventories.

"I don't think we can turn it off safely," Clive announced. "It's running through a cycle and interrupting the cycle wouldn't be good."

"How not good?" Humphrey asked.

"We'd basically be back to smashing it," Belinda said.

"How long will this cycle take, then?" asked Carlos, the leader of Team Work Saw. He was looking at the struggling Jason.

"Somewhere between half and a full day," Clive said.

"Minus the time it's been running already," Belinda added.

"Bugger that," Jason said. He gestured and a line of darkness appeared on the ground. An archway of dark crystal, sparkling with internal lights. Shadows then filled the arch with star-speckled darkness.

"I didn't think portals worked with this thing on," Carlos said, gesturing at the orrery.

"Jason's not really a rules guy," Neil said.

"Not a portal," Jason said. He making a spreading gesture and the archway grew larger, enough to accommodate the entire crystalline device. "Clive, unbolt that thing from the roof."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," Clive said.

"You know me," Jason grunted. "Bad ideas are kind of my thing."

Clive looked uncertainly at Humphrey, who shrugged his shoulders.

"Alright," Clive said. "Lindy, if you would?"

Belinda conjured a pair of socket wrenches on long poles, handing one to Clive. The Orrery was attached to a metal plate that was bolted to the ceiling and they started removing the bolts. Humphrey moved under the device, his strength more than able to take its weight as the plate loosened.

"Are you sure?" he asked Jason.

"Yes," Jason snarled. "Quickly, please."

Once the device was free of the ceiling entirely, Humphrey lugged it through the archway. As soon as it was gone, the overwhelming aura vanished and Jason dropped to his knees in relief, his own aura fading away. He closed his eyes, wincing for only a moment before wearily getting back to his feet and following Humphrey through the arch.

Deep under the ruined city, three servants of Purity had made their way through the city's even more ruined subterranean infrastructure. They had to fight their way through a few silver-rank Builder constructs as they neared their goal before finally arriving in a vast and startlingly intact chamber. That a space this large and this deep had survived undamaged spoke volumes on the integrity of its construction.

Most of the city's underground had been constructed from brick, but this entire chamber was built from dark industrial metals, with heavy bolts and thick reinforcement beams on the walls and floor. The chamber was a combination refinery, forge and manufacturing plant, the size of an indoor arena. The high ceiling was blurred with smoke haze and shadow, with the only light source being the glow of molten metal.

Industrial silhouettes loomed in the dark, whether the large machinery or the constructs that operated it. These constructs were larger than normal but not of the combat variety. These were utility machines, purely for servicing the operation that had not stopped even after the flying city fell from the sky.

A few more combat constructs moved to attack Sendira, Fila and Ramona, but there were not that many available. The completed constructs all immediately moved out into the winding network of mostly collapsed tunnels as soon as they were finished. Only a handful of freshly built ones were present, some still glowing with heat from the manufacturing process. The utility machines made no attempt to attack.

The trio didn't act personally, allowing the two gold-rank converted with them to handle the constructs. The essence users could sense the presence of three more gold-rank auras on top of the converted; the clockwork kings they had come looking for. The construct kings were themselves utility constructs that, like the others, did not move to attack. They were somewhere off in the dark, unreactive to the presence of the intruders. Two of the auras were distinct and easy to pinpoint, while the other was diffuse and seemed to fill the room.

Once the gold-rank converted dealt with the combat constructs, Sendira launched a glowing projectile into the air that flared into a bright light just before it would have struck the ceiling. Motes of light burst out, then started drifting around the room, illuminating everything.

They immediately spotted two clockwork kings, having known where to look from their auras. They looked like clockwork skeletons, twice the size of a human, semi-covered in metal panels that only partly covered their internal mechanisms. Everything else in the room, from the walls to the vats of molten steel to the constructs it created, was crude and industrial in design. The clockwork kings, however, were works of art. Their metal panels were lacquered in white and decorated with brass embellishments. The internal mechanisms showing beneath were intricately crafted like the inside of a pocket watch.

Each construct king had four arms, all of which ended in what were similar to hands but with many more fingers, each with many points of articulation. They were too delicate to be designed for fighting, although they would be dangerous to anyone below their rank if put to violent purpose. All the arms were busily assembling devices that looked tiny in the hands of the large kings. The components were being plucked from within the kings' own bodies; delicate pieces that were set together with swift but absolute precision.

"Where's the third one?" Ramona asked, looking around. Now that there was light, she and her companions could see the room clearly.

"There," Fila pointed. The others looked and saw the arms of a construct king, but while they were moving around, they were not attached to the rest of the king but an incongruously crude piece of industrial machinery. They quickly realised that the reason the construct king's aura was so scattered was that so was the king itself; without apparently impairing its function, the king had been disassembled and integrated into the infrastructure of the facility.

"That's good," Sendira said. "We'll take the intact ones and the Adventure Society can destroy the other, happy that they've shut down the production."

"And how are we going to take the intact ones?" Fila asked. "They're docile now, but will they come quietly?"

"They will," Sendira told her. "When the Builder cult delivered the first construct king to us, they also delivered a device to control it. It was tailored to that king only, but at the same time we purified the king, we purified the device. Now we control all its functions and simply turned the restriction off."

"That's good," Ramona said. "We should move swiftly, then."

"Agreed," Sendira said. "I will..."

Sendira trailed off as the pervasive aura from the beacon they activated was cut off. It had been drenching the island, even into the subterranean depths, but suddenly it vanished.

"You said that they wouldn't be able to turn it off," Ramona accused Sendira.

“They couldn’t,” Sendira told her. For the first time since arriving on the island, she showed an expression of uncertainty. “Even if they did find a way to shut it off, the aura would have diminished slowly. And if they’d destroyed the beacon we would have felt an aura pulse that would have broken the minds of anyone too close to it. It shouldn’t be possible to just cut the aura off like that.”

“Maybe they portalled the beacon away,” Fila suggested.

“Portals won’t work even remotely close to the beacon, let alone right on top of it.”

“A storage space?” Ramona asked. “Could they stow the beacon away?”

“Perhaps,” Sendira said. “That won’t work for long, though. The beacon will swiftly destroy any kind of dimensional bag they put it in and be excreted from the dimensional space as it breaks down. As for a storage space coming from someone’s abilities, the beacon will have very bad effects on anyone who tries that. It might even kill them if they don’t take it back out.”

Sendira nodded to Ramona.

“I believe you are correct. Either it’s in a storage space or a dimensional bag, which is the only explanation for the aura just vanishing. It’s unsustainable, however, so the beacon will be active again soon. Until it is, however, our actions will be exposed. The gold-rank adventurers will have sensed our auras and know our location. We need to move quickly.”

“Are you sure the beacon will come back?” Fila asked. “Escaping the island won’t be easy without the cover of the beacon.”

“Of course it will,” Sendira said. “Anything capable of containing that beacon would have to possess inconceivable power.”