

## 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.

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

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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.

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➤ [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.
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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.

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- You have inflicted [Harbinger of Doom] on [Pure Converted].
  - [Pure Converted] has resisted.
  - [Harbinger of Doom] does not take effect.
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It wasn't enough to *completely* shut Jason's powers down.

Jason muttered grouchyly 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.

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

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#### 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.
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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.

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

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- **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.
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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."

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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.”