

## 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.

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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.”

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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.

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#### 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.

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#### 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.