

Chapter 494

I Liked the Fighting Better

Jason was once more riding a land skimmer along the road network that wove through the local equivalent of Central America. Each side of the broad thoroughfare was lined with dense jungle. According to his map, Jason was less than an hour from the final destination on his journey before he could portal back to Rimaros.

Something twinged at his aura senses, so light that he wasn't sure he hadn't imagined it. It was certainly closer than he wanted anything to get undetected. It could easily be an especially stealthy monster. If it was a gold-ranked one he was in trouble, although sneaky monsters were typically less effective in an open fight.

Jason blasted the area where he'd glimpsed the aura with a heavy fist of suppressive aura force and his magic senses felt something break. Three figures in white outfits became visible by the side of the road. One of them swept a sword from which a blade of light shot out and split Jason's land skimmer in half. Jason landed lightly on the ground as the vehicle dissolved into his shadow.

He conjured his blood robes and cloak around him as he looked at the three people. They all wore white leather armour, a man and a woman flanking a second woman in the middle who was clearly the leader. She was scabbarding the sword she had used to destroy Shade's vehicle form.

All three had stark white hair and their auras read as human, despite the man amongst them having the slender frame and tapered ears of an elf. It wasn't just their armour that was white but everything they were wearing, from the metal of their belt buckles to the blade of the woman's sword. Jason had only known one person to dress like that.

"You're as perceptive as promised, Asano," the woman in the lead said.

Jason's mind quickly processed. The white clothes; knowing who he was and where he'd be. Along with making him realise something he should have already anticipated, it told him who they were and what they were doing.

"Purity church," he said. "The Builder sent you."

"Laughably, the impure being is under restrictions as to who he can send after you."

"That's laughable? A bunch of Purity adherents playing flunky to an 'impure being' and he's the one deserving of mockery?"

"None of his people could take you down under the restrictions he is under because his filthy minions are weak. He made a concession to our principles because we know

exactly how to handle filthy little plague-bringers that hide in the dark. And as you can see, we're all silver rank. There's only the three of us; no overwhelming numbers. No excuses for your interdimensional friends to interfere in affairs that aren't theirs."

"That's funny, coming from someone shackled up with the Builder. If I didn't—"

Mid-sentence, Jason suddenly opened a portal. The Purity trio wasn't caught unaware, the subordinate woman throwing an object as the portal arch rose from the ground. Jason dove for the portal but the thrown object moved in a flash, a conjured chain wrapping around his body before vanishing.

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- You have been affected by item [Inescapable Chains].
 - [Inescapable Chains] has been consumed to inflict [Inescapable]. This effect ignores resistances.
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Jason knew the affliction, as his own Inexorable Doom power could inflict the same one.

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- [Inescapable] (affliction, magic): Cannot be affected by teleport or non-damaging dimension effects.
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It rendered the portal in front of him useless and prevented him from shadow jumping. They had come prepared, having an item that could negate one of Jason's most critical techniques. It passed straight through his powerful resistances to sealed off any chance of easy escape while also crippling his normal combat style. The trio looked at him smugly, still not moving to attack.

"You should just come quietly, Asano. You can't win. That agreement made on your behalf might stop us from using gold-rankers but there was nothing about very expensive and specialised items. They hid us from your senses and now have cut off your ability to run or hop around in the dark. Combined with our abilities, which already counter yours, you have no chance."

Jason winced under his hood, the enemies not seeing it. Trying to take him alive made what would come next a much trickier proposition.

"The Builder wants me dead," Jason said. "Going along quietly doesn't seem like a good choice for my long-term health."

"We have a use for you, first. Come along and maybe you'll find a chance to escape. Better than fighting and dying."

"I've been taken prisoner and I've fought and died," Jason said as he conjured a dagger into his hand. "I liked the fighting better."

The three Purity loyalists all drew swords. No one moved as they continued to eye each other off.

“What does Purity need with me?” Jason asked.

“You aren’t worthy of our god’s attention, Asano. One of our members needs you to be her worm on a hook.”

“There’s a lot of that going around,” Jason said and dashed forward.

The three Purity loyalists reacted swiftly, one of them throwing up a hand that flashed with blinding light.

➤ **You have been afflicted with [Flash Blindness].**

Being reliant on sight in the midst of combat was something Jason had been trained well beyond. His other senses painted a perceptual picture he had long used when his eyes were insufficient or deceived. The sound of the blade; the resonance of the magic passing through its enchanted metal. The feel of the air being displaced around him and the intent in the auras too weak to hide from him. If anything, the impediment helped Jason slip into his combat trance state.

Despite being one man with a knife against three people with swords, Jason held his own. Being surrounded by enemies was nothing new and his powers and skills combined to make him supernaturally elusive. Shade's ability to suppress various giveaways prevented them from using the same senses Jason did to read the battle. His cloak masked his movement and feints made with his aura misled their magical senses.

In many ways, Jason had blinded them more than they had him. Even attacks that should have landed missed as his cloak bent space around him. The bright swords of the Purity loyalists flashed with rapid and precise movement but it was as if they were stabbing at an empty cloud of darkness. On top of everything else, two of Gordon’s orbs were intercepting attacks in shield form, buying Jason precious breathing room.

Jason didn't pull out his familiars for different reasons. With Colin, he needed to maximise his regeneration until he had built up the effectiveness of his drain attacks with afflictions. Also, Colin himself was very reliant on afflictions and Jason wanted to diminish the resistances of the enemy before deploying him to full effect. There was also the risk that the enemy would have some countermeasure to the leech swarm. They knew his abilities and came prepared; they would be fools to ignore arguably his strongest trump card.

Similar factors led to him retaining Gordon. Having Gordon not manifest meant that Jason could use a pair of much-needed shields and Gordon added to Jason's already formidable aura strength. Jason was simultaneously suppressing three auras of his own rank, preventing three auras worth of benefits to the enemy and detriments to himself. These were not weak or inexpert auras, either. Their solid control lacked weak points that made them easy to collapse. Only consistent pressure and raw strength got the job done.

There was also the likelihood that the enemy had attacks that could hurt Jason's incorporeal familiars, Shade and Gordon both. Jason was saving Shade in case the fight went poorly and he needed to make an escape.

Even with a combat trance pushing him to the limits of his capability, Jason was heavily pressured. Unable to shadow jump away, he stood his ground, every moment on a knife's edge. The trio of loyalists showed off exceptional training that marked them as elite adventurers on top of being religious zealots. For all that Jason's training had been diligent and exceptional, that of the Purity adherents was no lesser.

The difference between Jason and his opponents was the reason Rufus had founded a training annex in Greenstone. Elite adventurers from high magic zones trained in safety, too valuable to risk losing before they came into their true power. They were raised through the use of mirage chambers and carefully cultivated monster battles under the watchful eye of instructors.

Jason, by comparison, had been fighting life and death battles from the beginning. Before he was an adventurer – before he was even iron rank – he had faced battles where he was unprepared, underpowered, outnumbered and outmatched. Fighting on the knife's edge was a place where he knew how to stay balanced.

Jason's cloak and senses were doing some heavy lifting as the four silver-rank combatants flittered around one another like leaves in a wild gust. Jason's other abilities did not fare so well.

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- Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin], [Price of Absolution] and [Wages of Sin].
 - [Sin] had been resisted and does not take effect.
 - [Price of Absolution] had been resisted and does not take effect.
 - [Wages of Sin] had been resisted and does not take effect.
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Unsurprisingly, worshippers of Purity had potent resistances. The only effects that managed to stick in the early stages of the fight were those that, like the affliction preventing Jason's shadow jumping, ignored those resistances. Each attack levied against Jason incurred the sin affliction from his aura. Unlike the same one from his special

attacks, those afflictions went straight through their resistances. Further, each instance of sin on his enemies let Jason's aura diminished their resistances.

One of the biggest problems that affected Jason when his afflictions were slow to build was that it hurt the effectiveness of his Amulet of the Dark Guardian. One of his most precious useful items, he had earned it alongside the first scar on his soul and its power grew with him over time.

For every affliction Jason delivered, the amulet gave him a shield that could absorb damage and, after it had, became a short-lived healing effect. Each shield and heal was weak but Jason normally output a vast number of afflictions. The rapid acquisition and expenditure of the shields was a critical buffer to Jason's ability to endure hits. Without it, Jason was working with a much smaller margin of error.

The loyalists would not stand around and wait for Jason to build up power, however, and they had abilities of their own. Using their numbers to pressure Jason, they positioned him to suffer attacks that couldn't be avoided through small, evasive motions. Waves of searing light and short-lived, conjured sword-squalls burned and cut. Even with all his evasiveness, the swords of the enemy still managed to land some magic-infused attacks. The enemy was too skilled to dance in Jason's hand.

Jason couldn't avoid everything and was struck by savage special attacks that burned his flesh and even dispelled his cloak. He suffered extra hits even in the brief moment it took to conjure it again.

Although his regeneration was potent, Jason was not building up fast enough. Without afflictions properly landing on his enemies, his drain attacks were too weak. Without the ability to jump out of the combat, he couldn't buy a moment to cast a more powerful drain spell. Even if he could have, its effectiveness would likewise suffer from the same absence of afflictions.

Although it was looking bad, hope was far from snuffed out. Not every affliction fell short, especially as the resistance of his enemies slowly dropped.

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- Special attack [Leech Bite] has inflicted [Bleeding], [Leech Toxin] and [Tainted Meridians].
 - [Bleeding] is already in effect. [Bleeding] has been refreshed.
 - [Price of Absolution] had been resisted and does not take effect.
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Tainted Meridians was one of Jason's silver-rank afflictions that had seen little use as it had minimal impact on monsters that used mana in a different way than essence users. Landing the affliction on his current enemies was much more useful.

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- [Tainted meridians] (affliction, poison): Subject's stamina and mana costs for magical abilities are increased. The effect of drain abilities used on them is increased. Bleed effects on them cause mana loss commensurate with blood loss.
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Jason's only realistic chance at winning the fight was to out endure his enemies, but silver-rankers had no shortage of endurance. The tainted meridians afflictions would accelerate the clock Jason needed to run out.

Tainted meridians taking hold marked the turning point in the fight as Jason's afflictions finally started to bite. As he continued to clash with the loyalists, dark blood and jagged rents marred their once-pristine white armour. Jason was bloodied himself, but it was soaked by his robes or hidden by his cloak, while he was healing.

The enemy had been healing as well, at the start, having their own passive regeneration. Now that afflictions were taking hold, bleed effects were soaking the healing and leech toxin was refreshing the bleeds as the healing consumed them. As the fight dragged on, his enemies grew weaker as he grew stronger.

He was about to move the fight into a new phase and start draining afflictions when his enemies beat him to it. One member of the trio created a magical dome around the three of them.

"Gordon," Jason said, his familiar appearing and immediately blasting the barrier with six beams of energy specialised in breaching magic. Even so, the barrier was resilient, being a channelled ability. Channelling powers required the user to give up any other active abilities, but the power was worth the inconvenience when used well.

The barrier was used very well, showing off the trio's teamwork. The moment it went up, the leader started chanting a spell incantation that chilled Jason to the bone. The last time he had heard it was the very first time he fought a silver-ranker, also from the church of Purity. He remembered its effects, which were a bane to almost every combat power Jason had.

Jason realised that when they claimed their powers countered his, it had been no empty boast. A cleansing light washed out of the barrier, through his enemies and then through him.

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- All of your afflictions on [Purity Priest] have been cleansed by an effect that ignores all cleanse prevention.
 - All of your afflictions on [Purity Adherent] have been cleansed by an effect that ignores all cleanse prevention.
 - All of your afflictions on [Purity Adherent] have been cleansed by an effect that ignores all cleanse prevention.

- All of your boons and the boons on your items have been negated by an effect that ignores dispel prevention.
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At the same time, the third loyalist cast a slow but powerful healing spell to follow up. With Jason's afflictions gone, it took full effect, erasing all the damage Jason had done. In moments, everything Jason had accomplished in the fight was washed away. He didn't hesitate, recalling Gordon and having Shade bodies flood out between himself and the barrier.

This was the contingency for which Jason had been holding Shade. Jason burned a large chunk of his mana to manifest starlight cloaks over all the Shade bodies, then disappeared amongst them. His aura vanished, the enemies still inside the barrier losing all track of him.

The one advantage Jason gained from his enemies bottling themselves up was that it finally gave him a chance to break away. The Shade bodies, Jason amongst them, dove into the jungle and scattered. The incorporeal creatures were unimpeded by the thick Panamanian jungle and Jason was not much worse off. His cloak bent space, not to ward off attacks but to allow him to slip easily through the dense jungle growth.

The Shades and Jason alike melted into the shadows cast by the thick canopy overhead. If he could play hide and seek long enough in the jungle, Jason could wait out the duration of the affliction blocking his ability to portal away to safety.

The auras of Jason's enemies were moving closer as he sensed them flying over the jungle. He knew that his own flight power was mediocre and unlikely to match their speed. As for staying in the jungle, even slipping through the growth like a ghost couldn't outpace their flying over it. He slowed down enough that the remaining Shades he hadn't sent out could muffle the sound of his passage through the harsh terrain.

Tiny bird-shaped lights came darting through the canopy like phosphorescent hummingbirds, banishing the shadows around them. They spread out in a sweeping arc, quickly revealing which of the shadowy figures moving through the jungle were decoys. Jason kept moving but the glowing birds were both very fast and very numerous, tracking Jason down in far less time than he was happy with.

He called out two of Gordon's orbs, using them to shoot down the birds they lit up his hiding places but more quickly came. It was immediately evident from the auras converging on him that the birds were giving away his position the moment their light fell on him.

Running out of options, he blasted the light birds closest to him to restore the shadows and then dove into a thick mud pit. Unfortunately, the three Purity loyalists were not the Predator and Jason was not Arnold Schwarzenegger. While the conjured birds were deceived, the loyalists were not fools. They realised Jason had to be hiding to escape the reach of the birds and started sweeping his last confirmed area.

They slowed down their flight and brought out what looked like miner's lanterns, if miners were extravagantly wealthy and made their tools from silver and gold. They started slowly panning over the jungle with beams from the lanterns. Jason had no doubt this was another item procured to overcome one of his advantages, likely Shade's ability to mask his presence from various means of detection. This aspect of the familiar's power was more versatile than strong, so Jason was sure a specialised tool would penetrate it.

Jason was running out of options and it was coming down to luck as he waited for a chance to sneak away in a moment he was overlooked or the sweeping beams passed him by. The moment didn't come as one beam, then a second and third settled on him. Moments later, his three pursuers descended through the jungle canopy on wings of light.

Laying filthy in the mud, Jason glared up at the three loyalists.

"Look at you," the leader said. "It was always going to come to this."

Jason got to his feet and conjured his blade into his hand.

"It always does," he said, flashing a savage, bloody grin before it disappeared into his hood as he conjured up another cloak.

The leader sighed.

"Very well," she said. "Melody will have to be disappointed. Kill him."