

## Chapter 231

### Trading Safety Today For Death Tomorrow

The team had been aware going in that there were locations within the city that were more than just empty ruins. A number of trial-goers had reported such locations to the Magic Society and Emir's people, who had undertaken a large-scale debrief of the iron rankers who survived the trials. In addition to monsters unlike those found elsewhere in the city, such locations held unusually valuable treasure.

Clive had been one of those who encountered such a place during the trials, where he obtained the legendary set items both he and Neil were wielding. For him it was a staff and wand set that had become a crucial part of his combat potential. For Neil, it was a fist-sized orb that shone with a blue light when held, and a gold circlet with a blue gem set into the forehead. The abilities combined to powerfully enhance his shielding powers, which the team appreciated.

Given the formidable power of the abilities on those items, the team eagerly explored any location that was outside the ordinary. In addition to being as likely as any other place to have monsters to confront, there was always the chance of treasure. With the battles to come, any advantage was a much-needed blessing.

Most such places were either subterranean complexes or atop unusually tall buildings, much as Clive's had been. The first of these locations the team encountered for themselves was a sprawling complex of underground forges, foundries and furnaces. In addition to having dangerous fire and iron elementals, it was infested with bizarre undead, with metal fused into their bodies like magical cyborgs.

Jason had found it a frustrating place to fight, with most of the enemies highly resistant, if not outright immune to his abilities. He made good use of the sword Gary had given him, but it was a marked step-down in his capabilities.

"It's good for you," Sophie had told him.

"If you only train for when things go right, you die the moment they go wrong," Humphrey said.

"Yeah," Jason acknowledged unhappily. "Rufus used to tell me almost the exact same thing."

That place had eventually yielded some impressive treasures, although not so useful as those Clive had found. There was a pair of gloves that enhanced fire and iron-based abilities, and an anvil that enhanced the crafting of weapons. They took them with the intention of delivering them to Gary.

The complex had also delivered a solid haul of essences and awakening stones, almost all fire and iron. They were both common, but very popular, meaning they would fetch a good price once they returned to civilisation. They were a welcome addition to the piles of spirit coins and quintessence gems piling up in their storage spaces, courtesy of Jason and Neil's looting powers.

The next similar location they came across was likewise underground. They were uncertain to its nature, at first, as it was very plain, but they could tell it was unusual from how intact it was. Most subterranean spaces in the city were thick with mould and root systems breaking in through the walls and ceiling. This complex was all square tunnels and empty rooms, the brickwork uniform and unblemished.

"There doesn't seem to be anything here," Belinda said as they looked over another empty room. "No loot, no monsters nesting in here. Not even the dilapidated furniture and such you get in most of the ruins.

"All these empty rooms remind of the place we found in the delta under the swamp," Humphrey said.

"That's worth remembering," Clive said. "That place seemed empty until we had a face full of marsh hydra."

"A good lesson," Humphrey agreed. "This place may well be empty because the one thing in here has scared off the rest."

"Are we ready to face a silver-rank monster?" Neil asked. "We haven't had to do it yet, but the monsters have been getting stronger and stronger. We hardly see any iron-ranks anymore."

"If we caught one in isolation, then maybe," Humphrey said. "The problem is that we still have too many iron-rankers."

"I'm so close to bronze I can taste it," Neil said.

They continued through the complex, finally discovering what it was.

"A prison," Jason said as he surveyed the latest room they had entered. "That's great. Nothing bad ever happened in a creepy, abandoned, subterranean prison. I'm so glad monsters turned out to be real."

They were in a large, long cell block, with a mezzanine level running along each side. The cells, running the length of the room on both levels were barred, giving the team a clear look inside. None of the cells had occupants, being as empty as every other room they had come across. Moving through the large cell block, they found stairs that led down into another, and then a third. It was there that they finally found something.

"Signs of combat," Clive said. "This really does remind me of that place we found."

“This is fresher,” Humphrey said, examining a scorch mark on the wall. “Most likely, someone found this place during the trials.”

“There’s something at the far end of the room,” Jason said. His ability to see through darkness extended beyond where the light of the team’s glow stones grew dim.

The team moved forward carefully, finding a handful of corpses scattered about where they had fallen. A violent demise and months in the muggy, underground chamber had not left them in a pleasant state, but as Jason’s powers left enemies in much the same condition, they were used to it. Rather than dwell on the state of the bodies, they considered what might have left them that way.

“No trace of whatever killed them,” Jason said. “It seems the fight was either one-sided, or whoever killed them took their own fallen when they left.”

“Hard to determine what killed them from the bodies,” Neil said. “They’re too far gone to make out much. I am seeing some broken bones, so something physically powerful maybe.”

“We didn’t fight anything on the way in here,” Sophie said, already eyeing the room around them. “There weren’t any signs of combat before this, and I think they would have left some. I’m seeing scorch marks, chunks torn out of the stone floor. I think that whatever killed them didn’t show up until they reached this point.”

None of the team had let up their guard, but for the moment, nothing was making an attack.

“It could have been other adventurers,” Jason said. “We know that at least some of us were killing each other.”

“All we can do is be cautious moving forward,” Humphrey said. “That, and collect these poor souls for return to their families.”

They went about the grisly task of retrieving Adventure Society badges, for identification and to return to the families. There had been discussion of retrieving remains before they came in, but storage space was at a premium for coffins and any remains were likely to be a mess. A number of families made quiet approaches to try and make specific arrangements for their lost people, but Humphrey flatly refused. He insisted on keeping things even handed and restricting recovery to Adventure Society badges.

“What about their equipment?” Belinda asked. “It feels ghoulish to loot the dead.”

“We’ll return their gear to the families, along with the remains,” Humphrey said. “Once they’re identified.”

At the end of the cell block. Not far past the bodies, was a pair of large doors. They were metal, but unlike the bars of the cells, were unblemished by time and moisture. They

were plain and heavy, with a large keyhole on each. There were traces of a ritual circle drawn around each keyhole.

“Maybe that’s what brought out whatever killed them,” Jason said. “Trying to break-in triggered some kind of defences, maybe?”

“The obvious solution, then, would be to not break-in,” Neil said. “I mean, treasure is nice, but we just picked up a dead adventuring team. Do we really want to be the next one?”

“He’s not wrong,” Jason said. “We have a responsibility, here. We may be the only ones who can stop the cult from tearing this astral space off the side of the world. Or whatever it is they’re going to do with those giant golems. We can’t go getting ourselves killed over some loot.”

“On the other hand,” Humphrey said, “we need to push ourselves to the limit, and beyond. We don’t know what kind of challenges we’ll have to face in stopping the cult, but I don’t think the cultists being captured by the blood weaver is the end of it. I’m certain there are greater challenges ahead before we can put paid to the cult’s intentions.”

“So, you’re saying we should face whatever killed these people as a training exercise?” Jason asked.

“Since when are you the voice of moderation?” Clive asked.

“I’m not saying we shouldn’t do it,” Jason said. “I just think that the idea of not doing it is worth exploring. I’ve been too reckless, too often. I’ve survived too many times on luck which, sooner or later, is going to run out. This isn’t a monster we have some idea about, before we go in. We backed off because we weren’t ready for the blood weaver. What if this is worse?”

“We need to get you and Neil over the threshold for bronze,” Humphrey said.

“I’m not sure this will do it,” Jason said. “If there is a still-active defence system here, then it has to be something that didn’t die out in all the years this place has been dormant. My guess would be some kind of construct guardian, or maybe some undead. I won’t get to workout my powers like that.”

“Your familiars are the last abilities you have to advance,” Humphrey said. “If your other abilities are less useful, your familiars become more important.”

“I say we go for it,” Sophie said. “Humphrey’s right that we need to have the experience of having something dropped on us that we aren’t ready for. Better we experience that now, so we have the experience before the cultists do it to us.”

“What do you think, Clive?” Humphrey asked.

Clive rubbed his chin, thoughtfully.

“The biggest danger is to our iron-rankers,” he said. “I think we leave the decision to them.”

“That’s fair,” Humphrey said. “So, what’s it going to be?”

“I’m still up for it.”

“If Sophie’s in, I’m in,” Belinda said.

“I’m going to say no,” Jason said. “If Neil wants to make it three to one, I’m fine with that, but if he wants to play it safe, I’ll back him.”

Everyone turned to Neil.

“Great,” Neil said. “Now it’s my fault if everybody dies.”

“You’re saying go for it?” Jason asked.

“Jason, you weren’t there during the expedition,” Neil said. “You haven’t fought these people. You haven’t seen the monstrosities they turned themselves into. The endless sea of constructs at their command. I don’t know what they’re going to bring to bear against us, but we can’t be ready enough. Not taking every chance we have to get stronger is trading safety today for death tomorrow.”

“And here was I thinking that you were the sensible one,” Jason said. “Alright, then. Of course, if we’re wrong about the defence mechanisms, this whole conversation was pointless.”

The decision made, Clive turned his attention to the large doors.

“They messed up their unlocking ritual,” Clive said. “Even at a glance I can see how amateurish it was. No wonder they set off any defences.”

“Then do what they did,” Jason said. “You can worry about getting it right afterwards.”

“That’s not very professional,” Clive complained.

“Being professional isn’t the objective, right now,” Jason said.

“If the goal isn’t to get it right, then you might as well do it,” Clive said.

“That’s hurtful,” Jason said. “But fair enough. Everyone else get ready.”

While the team gathered in preparation for a fight, Jason examined the doors and the remnant lines of a ritual circle drawn onto each in chalk.

“You weren’t kidding, Clive,” Jason said. “Even I can tell this is a dog’s breakfast. It looks like someone who barely knew what they were doing just copied this ritual out of a book.”

“Probably someone who used a ritual magic skill book and never took the time to learn any theory,” Clive said.

“Was that aimed at me?” Jason asked. “I’ve been hitting the books pretty hard, as you well know.”

“Can you please just get on with it?” Humphrey asked.

“Sorry,” Jason said.

Jason took out a stick of chalk to redraw in the faded lines. He recognised the basic unlocking ritual, which was indeed something that had been in the ritual magic skill book he had used himself. That fortunately meant that he had the ritual incantation memorised, which was somewhat tricky. The chant was one of those that were series a series of sounds rather than words, in and of themselves, meaningless. They simply existed to set up a resonance and begin channelling magic through the ritualist and into the ritual diagram.

Jason carried out the ritual, but the locks in the middle of the ritual circles glowed red hot. Much of the redrawn circles burst off the doors in a puff of chalk dust. Jason turned and joined the others, drawing his sword in readiness for whatever appeared to meet them. They did not have to wait long.

Individual bricks in the walls and floor sank drew back into recesses with a grinding of stone. Moments later, small stone and metal spiders came swarming out of the holes all over the room. They immediately started scuttling toward the group, swarming over the walls and across the ceiling.

The construct creatures had minimal auras, but they were clearly iron-rank.

“Belinda, Neil.” Humphrey said.

“Yeah,” Belinda said.

“Got it,” Neil followed. “On your call, Belinda.”

The tiny constructs had painted the walls and ceiling as they moved on the team. As the front runners edged closer and closer, some of the team started throwing Belinda glances.

“Uh, Belinda?” Neil asked.

“Wait,” she said calmly.

Construct spiders started dropping off the ceiling and the upper parts of the walls as they drew excruciatingly close to the team. Clive raised his staff to fire off a blast and Belinda waved him down with a gesture.

“Not yet,” she said.

“Are you kidding?” Clive asked.

“I have to catch a lot of them,” Belinda said. “Alright, Neil. Now.”

Neil chanted out a quick spell.

*“Let your power fulminate.”*

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#### Ability: [Bolster] (Growth)

- Spell (boon).
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
  
- Effect (iron): The next essence ability used by the target ally has increased effect. This can affect parameters including damage, range and number of targets, depending on the affected ability. Cannot be used on self.
  
- Effect (bronze): Mana and stamina costs of the affected ability are reduced. In the case of ongoing mana and stamina costs, only costs initiated with the ability are affected. Costs invoked subsequent to the ability being activated are unaffected.

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As soon as she felt the power of Neil's spell affecting her, Belinda threw out her hand and a crystal rod rose up from the floor.

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#### Ability: [Force Tether] (Trap)

- Conjunction.
- Cost: Low mana-per-second.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Iron 7 (09%).
  
- Effect (iron): Conjures a crystal rod, from which a tether of shimmering force connects to all nearby enemies within a moderate range. Tethered enemies are dragged toward the rod, which is protected by a force field that inflicts moderate resonating force-damage to anyone in contact with it. If the force-field is ruptured, it explodes in a wave of resonating-force damage. If the rod is destroyed or removed from its location then it explodes in a wave of disruptive-force damage. Dimensional displacement, such as teleportation, severs the tether. Untethered enemies who enter within range of the rod become tethered. Only one force tether rod may exist at a time.

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Shimmering tethers of force shot out to every spider in range, which was almost all of them given how close Belinda had allowed the mass to encroach on the team. There were so many it seemed less like a series of tethers and more like a wall. All the spiders were plucked from the walls, ceiling or where they had fallen to the floor and dragged toward the crystal rod. The constructs were so light and weak that they all were yanked right up to the tip of the rod, piling into a ball at the end of the shaft like the head of a dandelion. The innermost spiders were constantly damaged as they were dragged against the force-field surrounding the crystal rod.

Not every one of the spiders had fallen within the range of the bolstered tether, but it was the significant majority. Belinda followed up with another power.

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Ability: [Pit of the Reaper] (Trap)

- Conjunction (dimension).
  - Cost: High mana.
  - Cooldown: 2 minutes.
  
  - Current rank: Iron 6 (14%).
  
  - Effect (iron): Conjures a dimensional space pit on any horizontal surface. The surface does not need to be solid or supportive. Anyone inside the pit suffers ongoing necrotic damage. If this spell is cast again while a pit already exists, the existing pit vanishes, depositing anyone inside upon the surface on which the pit was conjured.
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The rod fell into the pit that opened up underneath them, dragging the spiders down. Having moved from its original location, it detonated. The force field around the crystal rod blew up first, then the rod itself shortly after, both blasting the spiders with force and crushing them against the sides of the dimensional pit. Some were launched back up and out of the pit, although they landed inert and unmoving.

The team moved to clean up the spider constructs that had escaped the tether-pit combination, clearing out the rest with wand, staff, sword and, in Sophie's case, boot. It wasn't long before everything was done. The pit vanished, and the destroyed construct remnants disgorged up from the vanishing pit and into a pile.

"Does anyone else feel like that was a bit anticlimactic, after all that talk?" Neil asked, and Jason immediately let out a groan.

"Why in the world would you go and say something like that?" Jason asked.

"What?" Neil asked in turn. Suddenly there was a grinding sound as large sections of the floor started to descend, leaving large holes.

"That's what," Jason said.

"I think they would have opened, whether I said anything or not," Neil said.

"Well, now we'll never know."



## Chapter 232

### Stalwart

The spider constructs had appeared from holes that had opened in the walls and ceiling. This time, it was the floor that opened up, six large, evenly-spaced but much larger holes, appearing in a straight line down the length of the cell block. The team didn't wait for whatever was within to emerge, springing straight into action.

"I'll take the first, you the second," Clive said to Belinda and they both quickly chanted out their rune trap spell.

*"Emplace the mark of power."*

Runes appeared on the floor, in front of the first and second holes. They glowed brightly for a brief moment before vanishing. As they cast their spells, Humphrey vaulted into the air, a pair of dragon wings appearing on his back and pushing him upwards.

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#### Ability: [Dragon Wings] (Wing)

- **Conjuration (movement).**
- **Cost: High mana-per-second.**
- **Cooldown: None.**
  
- **Current rank: Bronze 0 (01%).**
  
- **Effect (iron): Manifest wings that are powerful but lack agility.**
  
- **Effect (bronze): The strength and resilience of the wings is increased, allowing them to be used for crude attacks to the sides and rear. The wings have strong damage resistance and very strong fire resistance. Ongoing mana cost is reduced from very high to high.**

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Humphrey alighted on the upper mezzanine level, letting the mana-hungry wings vanish again. Sophie sauntered forward, ready to meet whatever emerged, while Jason vanished into the shadows.

Neil had been hastily pouring salt from a small sack to make a circle. He knelt briefly and touched a finger to the circle when it was done. The salt crystals started sparkling like flecks of diamond in the sun before a dervish of crystal appeared above the circle, swiftly cohering into the shape of Neil's summon.

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Ability: [Chrysalis Golem] (Growth)

- **Summoning.**
  - **Cost: Very high mana.**
  - **Cooldown: 6 hours.**
  
  - **Current rank: Iron 9 (97%).**
  
  - **Effect (iron): Summons a chrysalis golem.**
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The golem was a large, humanoid edifice of translucent crystal, half as tall again as its summoner. Neil gestured it forward, where it positioned itself between the team's support contingent and the holes from which the enemy was about to emerge.

From each hole, a single figure rose up from below. Like Neil's golem, they were constructs, ascending on platforms that sealed the holes from which they came. They also shared the golem's intimidating size, but not its humanoid appearance. These new constructs had a body that was a vertical cylinder of plain, dark stone. From the base, four legs held it up, obviously built for stability over speed.

Equidistant at cardinal points around the middle of the cylinder were long, inhuman arms. Each arm was segmented with a pair of elbows that allowed them to move in uncanny gestures. The arms ended in blunted, four-fingered claws. Atop each cylinder, in place of a head, was a stone bowl. As the constructs rose up, spheres of magical force manifested into each bowl, shimmering like a soap bubble, and the constructs began to move.

Like all constructs, they didn't have a soul and their auras were the meagre product of the magic animating them. It was enough to let the team know their opponents were somewhere in the mid-range of bronze-rank power.

The two sides were moving on each other before the platforms bringing the constructs up had even completed their task. Sophie was the quickest, ignoring the first two constructs to go after the third, rapidly hammering attacks into the joints of its arms. The movement of the arms was quick and tricky, but Sophie's reflexes were up to the task. As it continued to rise up, she went after the leg joints as well. The effectiveness of her attacks was limited, but the resonating-force damage of her special ability did succeed in chipping away at the hard stone of the leg.

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Ability: [Immortal Fist] (Mystic)

- Special ability.
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Iron 8 (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 or higher-ranked attacks will be negated.

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The two constructs she had passed stepped over the edge of their holes before the platforms they rode reached the level of the floor to seal them. They moved forward towards the main group, only to walk over the now-invisible runes, which detonated as they did so. The explosion was not enough to knock the heavy creatures over but they were successful in causing enough damage to have cracks appear in their legs. This was most true of the closest construct, which had walked over Clive's trap. It suffered the full effect of the bronze-rank power, then the secondary explosion on afterward.

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Ability: [Rune Trap] (Rune)

- Spell.
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.
  
- Current rank: Bronze 0 (03%).
  
- Effect (iron): Create an explosive rune that will disappear after a short period. The rune can be set to trigger by proximity, caster trigger, or both.
  
- Effect (bronze): Enemies affected by the rune trap will be the source of a secondary explosion after a brief period.

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The second construct was not much more than briefly staggered by Belinda's trap, but Humphrey made the most of the immobile target. He plummeted down like a meteor, stacking up powers into a single, potent attack. He started by invoking one of his racial gifts.

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Ability: [Dragon Blood]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Essence Gift].
  - [Power] and [Spirit] attributes are enhanced for moderate mana-per-second.
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His dragon wings appeared once again as he plunged from above, driving him forcefully towards his target below.

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Ability: [Dive Bomb] (Wing)

- Special attack (movement, combination).
  - Cost: High stamina.
  - Cooldown: 20 seconds.
  - Current rank: Bronze 0 (02%).
  - Effect (iron): Accelerate down to attack a target from above; can be combined with normal or special melee attacks. Physical damage from these attacks is increased. No falling damage is suffered when using this ability, even if the attack misses.
  - Effect (bronze): A resonating-force shockwave is produced from the impact point.
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Another of Humphrey's racial gifts further enhanced the power of his attack.

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Ability: [Wing Raider]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Essence Gift].
  - Speed, momentum and damage of movement-type special attacks is increased. Heavy conjured weapons and armour do not increase stamina consumption, regardless of weight, and do not impede movement abilities. Light conjured weapons have increased weight and momentum without being heavier to wield, counting as heavy weapons for the purposes of special attack requirements.
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Dive bomb would do damage alone, but as it was a combination special attack, Humphrey added another power that would be especially effective against the construct.

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Ability: [Shield Breaker] (Might)

- Special attack.
- Cost: Low mana, moderate stamina.
- Cooldown: 10 seconds.
  
- Current rank: Bronze 0 (04%).
  
- Effect (iron): Inflicts additional resonating-force damage, highly effective against physical defences. Requires a heavy weapon.
  
- Effect (bronze): Damage to rigid material is significantly increased.

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As Humphrey plunged through the air, the sphere that had formed in the monster's strange bowl head floated up to intercept him. It grew as it moved into his path, large enough to engulf his whole body. Humphrey passed through the sphere, which popped like the soap bubble it resembled. It had not so much as slowed him down.

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- You have been trapped in [Sphere of Incarceration].
  - [Sphere of Incarceration] has triggered ability [Unstoppable].
  - [Sphere of Incarceration] has been destroyed.

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In a team full of unconventional members, it was easy to overlook Humphrey and his powers that were as straightforward as Humphrey himself. What he brought to the team was something that they otherwise lacked: simple, reliable power. When Humphrey Geller wanted to attack you, you were getting attacked.

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Ability: [Unstoppable]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Essence Gift].
  
- Movement abilities cannot be negated or impaired. Resonating-force damage and disruptive-force damage are imparted to any obstructing object, increased for each movement ability and special attack in effect. This is a movement effect.

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Humphrey came down on the construct like the United States military on an oil-rich nation. His assault from above was domineering, overwhelming and inflicted a level of widespread damage that went way beyond his expectations.

The initial strike smashed right through the stone bowl and burying itself deep in the cylindrical body. The construct was riddled with cracks and half destroyed, a job finished by

the dive bomb attack's secondary shock wave. It freed Humphrey's sword as the construct was blasted into shrapnel

As Humphrey destroyed the second construct Sophie continued to tie up the third. It tried to catch her with its own sphere, but her speed and mobility powers allowed her to nimbly avoid it, even as her attacks continued, unabated. The closest she came to being caught was when she looked back as fragments of the construct behind her explosively showered her with shrapnel.

One of her construct's legs gave out beneath her unrelenting attacks, but it continued to fight back with the lengthy, multi-jointed arms that tried to slam her into the floor. Some attacks she blocked, others she neatly side-stepped, all the while continuing her own assault. She was able to more than hold her own against her bronze-rank enemy, but it remained a dangerous opponent. She was all too aware that getting caught up fighting just one meant she was not protecting the team from the others.

Sophie and Humphrey had left one construct between them and the bulk of the team, which was intercepted by Neil's summon. Although the two constructs were of a similar size, the bronze-rank enemy quickly began to overpower the summon. It started by using two of its four clawed hands to grab the chrysalis golem's arms, holding them out of the way as a third claw hammered away on the golem's crystalline body. With each blow, a new rune appeared on the myriad facets of the chrysalis golem, even as it struggled, ineffectually.

While this was going on, Neil watched in silence, primed to throw out any necessary shields and healing for his teammates. Belinda was likewise actively prepared to support the team, as needed. Clive in contrast was drawing a ritual circle at the end of his staff, lines of golden light appearing at a wave of his finger.

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#### Ability: [Enact Ritual] (Rune)

- Special ability.
  - Cost: varies.
  - Cooldown: None.
  
  - Current rank: Bronze 0 (09%).
  
  - Effect (iron): Manifest lines of magic to draw out ritual diagrams. Materials required for a ritual may be used directly from a dimensional storage space instead of being placed within the diagram.
  
  - Effect (bronze): Create simple ritual diagrams to alter the parameters of magical items.
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Quickly completed, the ritual circle floated in the air, affixed by an invisible force to the end of his staff.

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- You have altered the effect of [Spell Lance of the Magister]. Damage has been altered from disruptive-force to resonating-force.
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The disruptive-force of his staff attacks were highly-effective against magic and adequate for most enemies, but would suffer against the hard and tough bodies of the constructs. The time it cost him to alter his weapons would be made up for in the effectiveness of their new, temporary damage type. He left his wand unchanged, however, as he was wary of the magic spheres the constructs each had. His senses could clearly make out their magical nature, which his wand's original damage would be effective against.

As the construct continued to hammer away at the chrysalis golem, its sphere floated out to hover over the golem's head. The construct's final arm rose from behind its main body to touch the sphere, which started to vibrate and grow. Clive immediately directed the beam of his wand to lock onto the sphere, while his staff repeatedly fired bolts into the construct's body. The magical bolts exploded on contact, also affecting the chrysalis golem. The damage caused new runes to form on the golem's body. The sphere above the Golem continued to grow but the disruptive power of the wand slowed that growth to a crawl.

At the far end of the cell, the distance from the rest of the team and the glow stones they carried made the shadowy darkness a playground for Jason. He danced among the last three constructs, an elusive, flickering shadow. The disadvantage was that his only viable source of damage was his sword, which would take time to build up enough power to be an effective threat.

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Item: [Dread Salvation] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

*A sword crafted with gratitude, in hope it would be of the greatest use in the moment of greatest need. It was forged with passion and expertise to be a reliable companion, bestowing upon it an incredible potential (weapon, sword).*

- Effect: If a special attack that applies an affliction is made with this sword, but the subject of the attack has a physical immunity to it, an instance of [Stone Cutter] is applied to the blade.
- Effect: If a special attack that applies an affliction is made with this sword, but the subject of the attack has a magical immunity to it, an instance of [Spell Breaker] is applied to the blade.

- [Stone Cutter] (magic, stacking): All attacks deal additional resonating-force damage; highly effective against physical defences. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
  - [Spell Breaker] (magic, stacking): All attacks deal additional disruptive-force damage; highly effective against magical defences and incorporeal entities. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
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Jason moved amongst the constructs like a spirit, doing all he could to hold their attention with his minimal damage. The more he could distract the back half of the enemies, the quicker his allies would deal with the front and move to assist him.

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- Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] and [Price of Absolution] on [Tartarian Golem].
  - [Tartarian Golem] is immune to [Sin].
  - [Sin] does not take effect.
  
  - Affliction immunity has triggered an effect on weapon [Dread Salvation].
  - Weapon [Dread Salvation] has gained an instance of [Stone Cutter].
  
  - [Tartarian Golem] is immune to [Price of Absolution].
  - [Price of Absolution] does not take effect.
  
  - Affliction immunity has triggered an effect on weapon [Dread Salvation].
  - Weapon [Dread Salvation] has gained an instance of [Stone Cutter].
- 

Until his allies could join move to help, Jason had the assistance of Gordon, whose beam attacks proved more attention-getting than Jason. One beam was disruptive-force, which weakened and eventually broke the magical spheres, forcing the constructs to form new ones. The other beam was resonating force, an effective weapon against the rigid, stone bodies of the constructs.

Shade had informed Jason that the constructs almost certainly relied on purely magical senses, lacking the sensory organs of a living creature. As Jason had little need of Shade's shadow bodies in the darkened area, Shade posited that he might be able to hide Jason from their senses entirely. For each of Shade's bodies subsumed into Jason's shadow, he could mask an aspect of Jason's presence, such as heat or sound. It apparently also extended to more unusual senses.

Jason declined, however, as he needed to hold the constructs' attention. Their spheres moved around and their arms lashed out, striking nothing but hard floor and empty air. Jason may not have been Sophie's equal, but he had the skills imprinted on him by skill books and consolidate with a year of training and experience. He had become formidable in his own right.



The three constructs became two as Humphrey moved past Sophie and started hammering on one of them, diverting its attention. He started with the strongest of his special attacks, which rocked the construct back, in spite of its great weight.

---

Ability: [Unstoppable Force] (Might)

- Special attack.
  - Cost: High mana, extreme stamina.
  - Cooldown: 1 minute.
  
  - Current rank: Bronze 0 (07%).
  
  - Effect (iron): Melee attack with massive momentum, dealing large amounts of additional resonating-force and disruptive-force damage. Requires a heavy weapon.
  
  - Effect (bronze): For each enemy struck the cooldown of this ability and the cost of the next use of this ability are reduced.
- 

After week after week of almost hourly battles, the team was quick to pick up on one another's rhythms. Belinda was at the ready and immediately reset Humphrey's attack.

---

Ability: [Renewed Effort] (Adept)

- Special ability (recovery).
  - Base cost: Moderate mana.
  - Cooldown: Varies.
  
  - Current rank: Iron 8 (14%).
  
  - Effect (iron): Reset the cooldown of a single ability of a single ally. It must be an ability you are aware of with a cooldown of less than one minute. The cooldown of this ability is equal to the time taken from the cooldown of the target ability.
- 

Using her magical tattoo, she ended the cooldown on her power, allowing it to reset Humphrey's attack a second time. Jason was almost caught in a sphere as he watched, boggle-eyed, as Humphrey pushed around the giant stone monstrosity as if it were a small child. Humphrey finished the construct off with a shield breaker attack, the specialty resonating-force power inflicting even more damage than his unstoppable force attack.

Sophie, in the mean time, had neatly disassembled her opponent. Where Humphrey left nothing but ruined chunks, Sophie had taken her golem apart joint by joint and then smashed the bowl, causing the sphere she had been dodging to wink out and not return.

"Sophie!" Neil called out, and she turned to look. The sphere of the first construct had finally grown large enough to encapsulate Neil's golem, which was suddenly covered in a crystal cocoon within the sphere. Trapped in the sphere and entered into its inert, chrysalis

state, the golem was no longer any kind of protector for Belinda, Neil and Clive. Belinda stepped up to buy the time the team needed.

With her power-resetting abilities expended, Belinda knew it was time to change roles. She starting by summoning a suit of heavy armour, plus a hammer and shield, which blinked into existence on her person.

---

#### Ability: [Bag of Tricks] (Magic)

- Special Ability (dimension).
- Cost: None
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Iron 8 (08%).
  
- 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.

---

She activated another power that made her grow taller and bulk-out with muscle, her clothes and equipment growing with her.

---

#### Ability: [Counterfeit Combatant] (Charlatan)

- Special ability (boon).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.
  
- Current rank: Iron 4 (74%).
  
- Effect (iron): Gain a significant increase to the [Power] attribute and temporary proficiency with armour and melee weaponry. Your physique enlarges, with equipment shifting to match.

---

As prepared as she could be, she squared her shoulders and moved to intercept the construct. She was only an iron-rank combatant, however, and a makeshift one at that. This became painfully obvious as she was rapidly pushed back, overwhelmed by the construct's multiple, irregular attacks. Her only saving grace was the construct's sphere was still occupied containing the chrysalis golem. The construct apparently unaware that the golem was in an inert state.

Sophie appeared, moving through the room like a breeze. She took over from a grateful Belinda, who had suffered something of a beating from the many-armed construct. The

shields and healing supplied by Neil had been the only thing that let her hold up against the higher-rank enemy even for the short time she had managed.

At the other end of the cell block, Humphrey moved on one of the now two remaining constructs. They were now ignoring Jason, in spite of the growing power of his sword, rightly recognising the larger threat.

Humphrey could not take the two constructs down as quickly as the first two, needing to wait for his most potent abilities to come off cooldown. His shield breaker attack, fortunately, had a short cooldown, made all the shorter by Belinda's aura.

---

#### Ability: [Masterful] (Adept)

- Aura (recovery).
- Base cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Iron 7 (55%).
  
- Effect (iron): Abilities of allies within the aura come off cooldown more quickly.

---

In between hits with his big-ticket attack, Humphrey fought using another of his special attacks. The human aptitude for special attacks had caused him to awaken an array of them, contributing to his potent offensive capability.

---

#### Ability: [Relentless Assault] (Might)

- Special attack.
- Cost: Low stamina, increasing with each successive attack.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Bronze 0 (02%).
  
- Effect (iron): Each use of this attack in quick succession increases the damage of this attack. Damage is of the same type caused by a normal attack.
  
- Effect (bronze): After a threshold of successive attacks is reached, escalating resonating-force damage is dealt with each attack.

---

Even this back-up attack of Humphrey's started putting paid to the construct he was fighting in relatively short order. He finished it with a shield breaker attack and moved onto the next construct as Jason realised that his contribution to the fight really would be minimal.

As he and Humphrey engaged the last construct at the back, the remaining one at the front was now squaring off against Sophie. Clive's staff had left it pocked with damage and

Sophie was doing the same, but it was the awakening of Neil's golem that signalled the end of that fight.

The golem explosively emerged from the crystal chrysalis. Shards of razor-sharp crystal shot out wildly, shredding the sphere containing the golem. Revealed in the wake of the detonated cocoon, the golem was leaner than it had been before, now with four arms, like that of its opponent, although more traditionally placed, two to each side of the golem's body.

With the disappearance of its first glowing sphere the construct created another in its bowl, which began floating it towards the newly reformed golem. The golem hammered the sphere with a fist and the bubble not only burst, but blasted force back at its creator. As the construct was rocked back on its legs the golem, more agile than before, moved in smoothly to start hammering away with its fists. The crude, blunt appendages vibrated as they struck, sending shockwaves through the enemy construct.

The new and improved chrysalis golem took out its enemy almost as quick as Humphrey, who was finishing the last of the last of the constructs up the back.

The team regrouped in the middle of the cell block. Clive and Neil enthusiastically told Jason and Humphrey about Belinda's stalwart efforts in buying time for Sophie to come to their aid.

"Still," Neil said. "Not as bad as we thought, in the end."

"Seriously?" Jason asked. "You're doing it again?"

"The bad thing already came out," Neil said. "What are the odds of there being another..."

He trailed off as the cell block filled with the sound of grinding stone.

## Chapter 233

### I'm Sick of Fighting Magic Rocks

The now-familiar sound of griding stone echoed through the cell block. The first time, it had been small holes in the walls and ceiling. The second, large holes in the floor. The group looked around for the new source of the grating noise.

"It's coming from the cells," Humphrey said. "All the cells."

The team looked through the rusty bars and spotted apertures that had appeared in the floor behind them.

"How many cells are there?" Sophie asked.

"Twelve cells to a side, per level; two levels to each side," Belinda said. "Almost fifty, all up."

"How can stuff rise up from the floors of the upper cells?" Neil asked. "They'd just come from the ones below, right?"

"Dimensional spaces," Belinda said. "Like the powers you and I got from the Reaper stones, Neil."

In each cell, a large glass box rose up from the floor. All of them were filled with a sickly yellow fog, from which the team could sense the auras within, currently in a dormant state.

"Those are bronze-rank auras," Sophie said. "Are we ready for that?"

"We have to be," Humphrey said. "So, yes."

Blood red light shone over their feet and they turned to see it was shining under the large doors they had used to trigger the room's defences in the first place. It seemed to be a trigger for whatever was inside the glass cases as the team felt the auras within them surge into wakefulness.

"Time to even out the numbers a little," Humphrey said, producing a bag of chalk dust and hurriedly pouring out a circle. He took out his summoner's die and rolled it on the floor, the face up rune glowing as it came to a stop.

"Oh no," Humphrey said as five large fish made of carved bone were summoned into being and started, flopping helplessly on the floor.

"The fish again?" Jason said. "Maybe you shouldn't be rolling the dice on the important fights. Literally and figuratively."

"It's a one in twelve chance," Humphrey said. Rather than have his helpless summons underfoot he dismissed them and they vanished. Neil's summon was still present, the crystalline golem maintaining its more advanced, post-chrysalis form. Leaner

and more agile than its basic shape, it had four arms ending in fists capable of powerful vibration attacks.

“Do we go smash those glass cases?” Neil asked. “We’d have to kick our way through the bars, right?”

“I suspect whatever is in there will come to us,” Jason said. “If you want to go into a prison cell were some unknown creature is about to burst out, though, be my guest. Actually, you’re the healer. You have to stay here.”

The sound of shattering glass signalled that their thus-far unknown enemies were about to make an appearance. The sickly-looking smoke that had been in the glass boxes came pouring out through the cell bars. The volume of it suggested that either the fog had been incredibly compressed in the glass cases or it was being continually fed through wherever the glass cases had arisen from. It obscured the team’s vision of the cell interiors as they heard the bars start to swing open with reluctant, rusty shrieks.

The creatures that emerged from the smoke were roughly humanoid; broad, heavy and hairless, with dark, scaly skin. Their arms were longer and more powerful than their legs, ending in thick, three-fingered hands. They had tiny, sunken eyes and nostrils in flat, noiseless faces. Their wide mouths were filled with misshapen teeth, like fragments of shattered, yellow stone. They pushed their way through cell doors barely large enough to fit them.

“They don’t look weak,” Neil said.

The smoke thinned as it moved into the room ahead of the creatures, filling the cell block with an unpleasant haze.

- 
- Poison cloud had inflicted you with [Breath of Tartarus].
  - You have resisted [Breath of Tartarus].
  - You have gained in instance of [Resistant].
  - You have gained in instance of [Integrity].

---

Jason looked to his companions with concern. They were more vulnerable than he was, not sharing the power to grow stronger from afflictions.

---

#### Ability: [Sin Eater] (Sin)

- Special ability (recovery, holy).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Increased resistance to afflictions. Gain an instance of [Resistant] each time you resist an affliction or cleanse an affliction using essence abilities.
  - Effect (bronze): Gain an instance of [Integrity] for each affliction you resist or remove using essence abilities.
  - [Resistant] (boon, holy, stacking): Resistance to afflictions is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Consumed to negate instances of [Vulnerable] on a 1:1 basis.
  - [Integrity] (heal-over-time, mana-over-time, stamina-over-time, holy): Periodically recover a small amount of health, stamina and mana. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
- 

The rest of the team were not completely vulnerable, with Sophie and Jason's auras both shielding them.

---

#### Ability: [Cleansing Breeze] (Swift)

- Aura (holy, cleanse).
  - Cost: None.
  - Cooldown: None.
  - Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
  - Effect (iron): Allies within the aura have increased resistance to curses, diseases, magic afflictions, poisons and unholy afflictions. This is a holy effect. Negates poisons in the air; this is a cleanse effect.
  - Effect (bronze): Allies within the aura are periodically cleansed of curses, diseases, magic afflictions, poisons and unholy afflictions. Mana and stamina recovery effects on allies have greater effect.
- 

Cleansing breeze was one of the precious few powers that had reached bronze for Sophie, accelerated by a preponderance of poisonous monsters in the city. Thorny plant monsters, spitting frog monsters, snake monsters. The team had a good amount of cleansing between them, which made such creatures easy pickings, as well as helping them accelerate the advancement of those powers.

In the case of Sophie's aura, it would slowly but surely cleanse many types of affliction from her allies. It was already purifying the fog around them and, added to Jason's aura, left the team was in relatively good stead.

---

#### Ability: [Hegemony] (Sin)

- Aura (holy, unholy).

- Base cost: None.
  - Cooldown: None.
  - Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
  - Effect (iron): Allies within the aura have increased resistance to afflictions, while enemies within the aura have their resistance to afflictions reduced. Enemy resistances are further reduced for each instance of [Sin] they are suffering from.
  - Effect (bronze): Inflicts an instance of [Sin] on enemies that make physical or magical attacks against allies within the aura. Instances applied in this way cannot be resisted.
- 

Belinda, Sophie and Neil suffered the worst, their iron-rank constitutions struggling against the poison even with the powers bolstering their resistance. Jason clasped a hand on Neil's shoulder.

*"Feed me your sins."*

Red life force emerged from Neil, tainted by the same colour as the mist. The taint disappeared into Jason's hand, leaving Neil looking relieved as his now-healthy life force returned to his body.

---

#### Ability: [Feast of Absolution] (Sin)

- Spell (recovery, cleanse, holy).
  - Base cost: Low mana.
  - Cooldown: None.
  - Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
  - Effect (iron): Cleanse all curses, diseases, poisons and unholy afflictions from a single target. Additionally cleanse all holy afflictions if the target is an ally. Recover stamina and mana for each affliction cleansed. This ability ignores any effect that prevents cleansing. Cannot target self.
  - Effect (bronze): Enemies suffer an instance each of [Penance] and [Legacy of Sin] for each condition cleansed from them.
  - [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.
  - [Legacy of Sin] (affliction, holy, stacking): You are considered more damaged for the purposes of execute ability damage scaling. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-



While this was going on, some of the monsters had already moved in to the attack. The team had their backs to the large doors, so the monsters wouldn't be able to flank them, although they would be able to drop down from above. While Sophie stepped forward with Neil's golem to hold off the first wave of attackers, Humphrey vaulted up to the mezzanine on their left with a flap of conjured dragon wings.

Humphrey engaged with one of the creatures that had been about to drop down. It's lengthy arms gave it reach, and the knobby scales running along them made those arms as tough as any weapon. The monster may not have been a match for Humphrey but it was still disconcertingly strong and tough, given how many they knew to be gathering, unseen in the poison haze.

Jason used his magic boots to leap up to the mezzanine on the other side, likewise engaging a monster. He inflicted a rapid series of slashes, the creature's reach no match for that of Jason's shadowy arm.

---

#### Ability: [Hand of the Reaper] (Dark)

- Conjunction (disease, unholy).
- Cost: Low mana-per-second.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
  
- Effect (iron): Conjure a highly flexible, semi-substantial shadow-arm that can extend or shrink. Conjured items can be conjured into the shadow hand. Can be used to make melee special attacks. Special attacks made using the arm inflict [Creeping Death] in addition to other effects.
  
- Effect (bronze): You can conjure a second arm. Special attacks made using the arms inflict [Rigor Mortis] in addition to other effects.
  
- [Creeping Death] (damage-over-time, disease, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until the disease is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
  
- [Rigor Mortis] (affliction, unholy, stacking): Penalty to the [Speed] and [Recovery] attributes. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Each time a new instance is inflicted, deals necrotic damage for each existing instance.

---

Jason's dagger barely drew blood from the scaly skin, but all Jason needed were shallow cuts. With just a few slashes, more than a dozen afflictions were loaded onto the monster. Jason's conjured dagger was the source of many, but not all of them, such as the special attack he was using

---

### Ability: [Punish] (Sin)

- Special attack (melee, curse, holy).
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
  
- Effect (iron): Inflicts necrotic damage and the [Sin] affliction.
  
- Effect (bronze): Inflicts or refreshes the duration of [Price of Absolution].
  
- [Sin] (affliction, curse, stacking): All necrotic damage taken is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
  
- [Price of Absolution] (affliction, holy): Suffer transcendent damage for each instance of [Sin] cleansed from you.

---

Neither Jason nor the creature were going to wait for the afflictions to slowly devour it. It lunged at Jason, although its relatively short legs and the afflictions it already suffered from made it a little slow. Jason easily stepped into one of Shade's bodies and out from another that had slipped past the creature while it was engaged with Jason, giving him plenty of time to cast a quick spell before the creature turned around to face him again.

*"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."*

---

### Ability: [Punition] (Doom)

- Spell.
  - Cost: Moderate mana.
  - Cooldown: 30 seconds.
  
  - Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
  
  - Effect (iron): Inflicts necrotic damage for each curse, disease, poison and unholy affliction the target is suffering.
  
  - Effect (bronze): Inflicts or refreshes the duration of [Penitence].
  
  - [Penitence] (affliction, holy): Gain an instance of [Penance] for each a curse, disease, poison or unholy effect that is cleansed from you. This is a holy effect.
  
  - [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.
-

The creature staggered as its muscles withered with necrosis, even as its wounds glowed with the transcendent damage starting to ravage it from the inside out. It lunged at Jason again with no more effect, Jason easily able to move from one of Shade's bodies to the other like a bully playing keep-away. He cast another spell.

*"Feed me your sins."*

The creature's life force became visible, tainted with the storm of affliction within it. Ugly curses, poisons and other horrors Jason inflicted swirled about with the shining transcendence of holy afflictions until they were drained out, siphoned off into Jason's outstretched hand. Even more of the holy afflictions were left in their place as the creature's life force once again became unseen.

- 
- 18 afflictions have been cleansed from [Tartarian Brute].
  - 36 Instances of [Penance] have been inflicted on [Tartarian Brute].
  - 18 Instances of [Legacy of Sin] have been inflicted on [Tartarian Brute].
  
  - Your mana and stamina have been replenished.
  - Stamina and mana cannot exceed normal maximum values. Excess stamina and mana are lost.

---

The brute stumbled to a halt as the transcendent damage devastated its body, lighting it up from the inside like some divine being, alighted upon the earth. Jason tilted his head as he watched the creature, one of the few he had encountered capable of surviving this far into his ability sequence. He chanted the incantation for the coup de grâce.

*"Mine is the judgement, and the judgement is death."*

---

#### Ability: [Verdict] (Doom)

- Spell (execute)
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.
  
- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
  
- Effect (iron): Deals a small amount of transcendent damage. As an execute effect, damage scales exponentially with the enemy's level of injury.
  
- Effect (bronze): Base damage is increased for each instance of [Penance] on the target.

---

The penance afflictions on the creature increased the base damage of the execute power, while the legacy of sin affliction made the damage escalation ramp up much faster.

The multiplicative affect of the two affliction stacks made for a shower of transcendent light that left behind not so much as a drop of blood.

Jason had never killed something that tough that quickly, but of course Humphrey had already finished his first and was making short work of a second. Another brute came lumbering out of the poison fog and Jason just raised his hand. Blood seeped from his palm for a short moment, after which a torrent of leeches came spraying out over the creature. Jason paid it no more attention and leapt from his side of the room over the gap to Humphrey on the opposite mezzanine.

“Can you drop these upper levels at this end, so they can’t drop down on the team?” Jason asked as Humphrey kicked a dead brute off his sword.

Humphrey gave the brick floor beneath them an assessing glance.

“Yeah. You want to go backs to the wall and let them come to us?”

“No, but we can’t have them fall on our heads either,” Jason said. “You keep the others safe while Neil and Sophie hold the poison at bay.”

“And what about the room full of monsters and poison gas?”

Shade emerged from Jason’s shadow as Gordon manifested with a surge of his aura. Jason glanced across at Colin, now bound up in his bloody-cloth humanoid shape.

“I’m sick of fighting magic rocks,” Jason said. “You can leave this lot to us.”

\*\*\*

Sophie’s aura was thinning out the gas in the area immediately surrounding the team and would soon have it cleansed entirely. Humphrey had used his shield breaker attack to shatter the mezzanine at their end of the room, so the creatures were only able to come at them at ground level, from one direction.

Sophie, Humphrey and Neil’s golem beat them back, assisted by Clive and his magical weapons. Neil watched over the whole group but made sure to keep a careful eye on Belinda, who was suffering the most from the gas not yet fully cleared out. Whenever it started to get the best of her, he would purge it from her with a spell.

---

#### Ability: [Clean Slate] (Prosperity)

- Spell (cleanse, heal-over-time, holy).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.
  
- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- **Effect (iron):** Negate boons on a willing subject. Cleanse target of afflictions of all types except wounding. The base strength of the cleanse effect is enhanced for each boon negated.
  - **Effect (bronze):** Target gains a heal-over-time effect that had additional effectiveness against wounding afflictions. The strength of the healing effect is increased for each boon negated.
- 

From the haze of poison fog, the team saw flashes of transcendent light and heard horrifying screams. They could only assume they came from the creatures because it definitely wasn't Jason's voice, although none of the creatures Humphrey and Sophie cut down had made so much as a grunt as they died.

At first the brutes surged in on them but slowly their numbers petered out. Finally, the last one to appear was in such a miserable state of decomposition that it looked like a zombie, complete with staggering shamble as it emerged from the fog before falling onto what was left of its face. A bloody strip of cloth snaked out of the fog, wrapping around its leg and dragging it back out of sight.

The next thing to come out of the fog were four cloaked figures; Jason, flanked by his familiars. He looked the team over, nodded as he saw they were fine, and his gaze turned to the large doors behind them.

"What's say we see what's back there?"

## Chapter 234

### Crossing the Threshold

The team waited for the sound of grinding stone that would signal another wave of combat, but the room was as silent as Neil, under Jason's baleful glare.

"I think we're clear," Humphrey said, finally.

The team stopped to rest in the zone of clean air Sophie's power had finishing clearing out, while the poison mist in the rest of the room slowly dispersed. As the haze disappeared, it revealed a horror show of dead creatures piled around the broken remains of the constructs they had destroyed earlier.

Neil tried looting the enemies, but while the constructs yielded a few crafting materials, the creatures yielded nothing. They also didn't disappear into rainbow smoke, showing them to not be monsters, but real creatures.

"These things have been sealed away for who knows how long," Neil said. "Kind of like those priests that Jason set loose."

"My interface called them Tartarian Brutes," Jason said. "The constructs were Tartarian Golems. Does that mean something to anyone?"

All eyes turned to Clive, who shook his head.

"In my world," Jason said, "there's a myth about a realm called Tartarus. It's a prison realm."

"We do seem to be in a prison," Belinda said. "It makes me curious about what's behind these doors."

While Neil had been looting, Clive had been examining the doors. He started drawing magic diagrams on them in golden lines with his ritual power. Jason noted that, unlike the attempts of the adventurers that came before, they were being placed in the middle of the doors, rather than around the locks.

"You're not trying to crack the locks?" he asked Clive.

"Those are a decoy," Clive said. "A key tip for ritual magic – and life, really – is to not do the same thing as the people who died trying. Also, a twin-circle ritual is a very bad idea if you don't know what you're doing."

Clive completed the ritual, the two magical circles lighting up on the door. The red light shining from underneath faded away and there was a pair of audible clicks from the locks. Clive dismissed his glowing ritual circles with a wave of his hands and pushed on the doors, swinging them open.

Beyond was a circular chamber with a vaulted ceiling and only one feature. In the middle of the room was a stone plinth, on which was what looked like a solid block of crystal encasing a sword. Around the block of crystal was a sphere of shimmering light, the same gold, silver and blue produced by Jason's transcendent damage powers.

The sword in the block was elaborately crafted into a sinister form. The blade was some kind of black metal, engraved with glowing red runes down its length. The hilt was constructed of some manner of red crystal and black stone, like ruby and onyx. The grip had sharp thorns, meaning that anyone who grasped it would be stabbing their own hand.

"It kind of looks like Jason's dagger," Neil said. Jason conjured his dagger into his hand, holding up for the group to compare. Jason's dagger was likewise an ornate object of black obsidian and red crystal.

"You're not wrong," Jason said. "It has to be coincidence, though right? I mean, if you're making a sweet-looking red and black bladed weapon, they're all going to end up with a certain level of similarity."

"Do those runes on the blade mean anything?" Sophie asked. Jason and Clive both had translation powers, so they looked closer.

"They don't say anything coherent," Jason said. "They just represent various concepts."

"Not ideal concepts, either," Clive added. "Soul. Power. Hunger. Life. Feast."

"That does sound pretty bad," Neil said. "As in, Jason's powers bad."

"Hey..."

"I'm more interested in that energy around it," Clive said. "It seems very strange to both aura and magical senses."

"It looks like Jason's dissolve people into nothing powers," Sophie said. "I'm not going near it."

"Agreed," Neil said.

Jason turned his attention to the shimmering light, slowly moving closer.

"Be careful," Humphrey warned, but Jason instead extended a hand toward the light.

"Jason, you should give me time to examine that before doing anything rash," Clive said.

Jason ignored them, having felt something familiar about the energy. As his fingertips came in contact with it, a bolt of sensation rocketed through his body and he yanked his arm back, like it had been shocked. He stumbled back a couple of steps before righting himself.

“It’s a soul,” Jason said, his voice haunted. “This light is a disembodied soul, somehow held here.”

“Are you sure?” Clive asked.

“Completely.”

Clive scratched his head as he looked at the light in confusion.

“That shouldn’t even be possible.”

“I’m increasingly convinced that impossible isn’t a thing,” Jason said.

“So, someone has turned an actual, living soul into a box?” Humphrey asked. “Isn’t that a lot to keep people away from a sword?”

“It isn’t trying to keep things out,” Jason said. “It’s trying to keep something in.”

“Are you sure?” Clive said. “Even with enhanced aura senses, it’s like there’s something obscuring it.”

“You can touch it, if you like,” Jason said. “I wouldn’t advise it, though. It’s much higher rank than we are. At least gold, and possibly even diamond. Just coming into contact with it had quite the spiritual kick, but its purpose was immediately clear. Everything it is has been directed to a singular intent: keeping this sword exactly where it is.”

“I’m going to touch it,” Clive said.

“Just be warned,” Jason said. “It’s going to kick you right in the soul.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t,” Humphrey suggested.

“I have to,” Clive said. “Call it a spirit of enquiry. I’d rather go through whatever punch-back it will give me than live my life knowing I had the chance to experience something so rare and unique, but didn’t have the courage.”

Clive reached out his hand and, after a brief moment of hesitation, touched the light. The breath shot out of him and he toppled like a tree, falling to the ground, unconscious. Neil quickly dropped to one knee to examine him.

“He’s fine,” Neil quickly said. “He just had a jolt to the system, causing some soul-body dysphoria. Best to let it settle than try and forcibly wake him up.”

“That soul-body thing sounds bad,” Sophie said.

“On a regular person it would be,” Neil said as he pulled a pillow from his dimensional satchel and placed it under Clive’s head. “For an essence user, it’s kind of like holding your breath for too long and passing out. He’s going to wake up with a fierce headache, but nothing more than that.”

The team gathered around Clive, looking down at him with concern.

“Really, he’ll be fine,” Neil said. “It won’t take him long to wake up.”



“Alright,” Belinda said. “I guess we decide what to do about this sword while we wait.”

“We don’t do anything,” Jason said. “Someone or something went to considerable effort to contain it here. All that stuff we fought in the cell block was little more than a no trespassing sign compared to the power involved with this. If someone went to the trouble of doing this to a person’s soul, just to keep this thing locked up, I don’t think letting it loose is a good idea. Even assuming we can figure out how.”

“So, after all the fighting we did to get here, you just want to walk away?” Belinda asked.

“Yes,” Jason said. “That’s exactly what I want to do.”

“I’m willing to take Jason’s advice on that,” Humphrey said. “Sophie, Neil?”

“Oh, I was happy to leave it there when I saw that fact that the handle stabs you,” Neil said. “That tells you all you need to know about the kind of weapon it is.”

“It’s not as if we’re even looking for a sword,” Sophie said. “You conjure yours, Humphrey, and you’re not giving up the one Gary made, right Asano?”

“Exactly right,” Jason said.

“That just leaves you, Lindy,” Sophie said. “It might not hurt to have some good equipment for your turn into a warrior power.”

“No thanks,” Belinda said. “I’ll stick with weapons that only stab the other guy.”

Clive groaned loudly as he gained consciousness. He groggily sat up, gripped his head in his hands and let out another coughing groan. Neil dropped back down to examine him.

“How do you feel?” Neil asked.

“Like someone dropped a sailing ship on me,” Clive said, looking past Neil to Jason.

“How did you avoid that thing hitting your soul like a hammer?” Clive asked.

“I didn’t,” Jason said. “I did warn you.”

“I wish I had your resilience of soul,” Clive said.

“No,” Jason said flatly. “You don’t.”

“We’ve decided to leave the sword where it is,” Humphrey said to Clive. “Unless you’re looking to reopen the debate.”

“No,” Clive said, shaking his head and then wincing at the pain it brought. “I felt that soul. What it went through to put that thing there and keep it there. I’m not even sure we could get that sword out, but I am very sure that we shouldn’t.”

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Neil and Jason were meditating outside where the cloud house had been set up. They were both anticipating an ascension to bronze-rank after the battle in the cell block

and didn't want to make a mess inside. The cloud house would be able to clear it up, but doing so would just accelerate the rate at which it would consume the supply of crystal wash Jason had fed into it. It had been a huge amount and should be sufficient for years, but there was no point accelerating the consumption when it wasn't necessary.

Neil's summoning power was his last remaining iron-rank ability. The golem had fought like a champion in their most recent conflict, so no one was surprised when Neil crossed the threshold into bronze. He wandered out from the secluded bit of ruin where he had finished his advancement, having washed himself down with a bottle of crystal wash after purging all the muck from his body in the transition.

He had stripped down to his underwear, so his waiting teammates could see that his blocky, weight-lifter physique had clearly changed to one of more sleek, yet still built-up muscle. It had also made his hair fall out and his fingernails grow strangely long. Jason helped remedy those minor issues with grooming scissors and some of Jory's hair growth cream.

Jason's change did not come that day, but Humphrey designated a day for rest. It was something they had done around once a week, taking a break from the otherwise unrelenting schedule of training and combat. They had killed more monsters than it was worth bothering to count, although they had been counting the flesh abominations. They had found and destroyed forty-one of the abominations thus far, which Shade's numbers put at around a tenth of the city's total.

Shade's familiar power advanced ahead of Gordon's, the shadow Jason's most constant companion. Jason had come to rely on his shadowy presence, available even when an apocalypse monster or an interdimensional reality assassin were socially inappropriate.

- 
- All [Dark Essence] abilities have reached [Bronze 0].
  - Linked attribute [Speed] has increased from [Iron 9] to [Bronze 0].
- 

Jason's power attribute had reached bronze over the course of their time in the astral space, taking his strength officially beyond what any normal human was capable of. It was the transition of his speed attribute that really made him feel like he had truly transformed, however. It affected not just his ability to run fast, but his reflexes, agility, dexterity and proprioception.

His newly ascended speed attribute also combined with his power attribute to make him capable of incredible feats. When he really should have gone back to meditation, his

team found him doing somersaults on the spot and climbing up ruins by jumping from wall to wall.

“I feel like a video game character!”

“No one knows what that means,” Sophie said.

“You’ve been able to move like this for as long as I’ve known you,” Jason told her.

“How are you not constantly running around and giggling like an idiot?”

“You should have seen her when she was younger,” Belinda confided, getting a glare from Sophie.

Jason finally settled down and resumed his meditation, after which it did not take long before Gordon’s power likewise crossed the line.

- 
- All [Doom Essence] abilities have reached [Bronze 0].
  - Linked attribute [Spirit] has increased from [Iron 9] to [Bronze 0].
  
  - Progress to bronze rank: 100% (4/4 essences complete).
  
  - All your attributes have reached bronze rank.
  
  - You have reached bronze rank.
  - You have gained resistance to iron-rank and lower damage sources and effects.
  - The potency of your aura has increased.
  - Your aura senses have improved.
  
  - Progress to silver rank: 00%.
- 

Jason’s transition from iron to bronze rank was much less violent than from normal to iron. That time, his newly created body had been composed of what Clive called trash magic, while his iron-rank one was closer to an ideal state for his rank. It still purged a large quantity of black, stinking biomass, however, that he washed off with crystal wash.

He trimmed his suddenly grown nails and regrew his hair with the cream, leaving his beard to grow back on its own. Humphrey and Clive had both grown beards during their time in the astral space, likewise losing them during their rank-ups. Neil, being an elf, had never grown more than a light scruff that Jason found enviably appealing.

Jason really did feel transformed. He was a new man and he felt it. Just moving around in his bronze-rank body felt different. His spirit attribute reaching bronze also had a big impact as it increased not just the sixth sense that detected auras but took his other five senses beyond the bounds of human potential. The world was suddenly alive with a nuance of colour like nothing he had experienced. He could pick out scents like he was cataloguing them and his hearing could pick out the world around him almost as well as

his vision. He could feel the air on his skin, taste it on his tongue. It was as if the world had transformed with him.

“Good, right?” Humphrey asked with a smile as he found Jason looking into the distance with a goofy grin.

“Oh, yeah.”

“We can handle monsters, or equivalent, of higher rank than us in large numbers, now,” Humphrey said. “Remember those teams we saw at the mirage arena in Jayapura? We can stand shoulder to shoulder with any of them, now.”

“Some people might think that means we can relax a little,” Jason asked. “Something tells me that you think it means we have to train even harder.”

“I can confidently say that we’re at an elite level for our rank,” Humphrey said. “That’s not such a big deal at iron rank, though. If we’re going to say the same at bronze and silver, we need to start the work now.”

“You know, Humphrey, the parents of every girlfriend you ever have are going to love you.”

“What do they think of you?” Humphrey asked.

“I haven’t gotten that far too many times,” Jason said. “There was my first girlfriend, whose parents liked my brother more. Which worked out, in the end. Everyone between her and Cassandra was more casual. Thalia Mercer liked me. Her husband, not so much, I think. The thing with Thadwick, you know.”

“I was always uneasy about Gabrielle’s parents,” Humphrey said. “Religious is good, but some people take it to a point that it gets a little unnerving.”

“Putting aside the religious being good thing, I know what you mean,” Jason said. “You get those really religious people with that weird intensity, you know?”

“Oh yeah,” Humphrey said. “I mean, the goddess of knowledge. It should be a fairly relaxed group, right? They kept asking me what I was reading. They did not like hearing that I didn’t have a lot of time to read with all the training. Speaking of which, we will be getting back to it. A few days to let you and Neil get a feel for your new power level. Then we’ll go after the blood weaver and see what we can find from what’s left of the cultists.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “I have some stuff to do before that, though. Growth items, familiar summoning. Basically, a bunch of rituals. Neil has his growth items, too.”

“We can take tomorrow,” Humphrey said. “After that, though, it’s back to work.”

## Chapter 235

### Anyone Can Be Useful

"I actually got the materials pretty cheap," Jason said. "Gary made it from local materials in the first place, so I just needed higher-grade versions of the same stuff."

Jason had drawn out the diagram for the ritual of ascension that would have his sword, like he had himself, advance from iron-rank to bronze. He was now laying out ingots of blood gold and star-fall silver, piles of quintessence gems and neat stacks of bronze-rank spirit coins.

The rest of the team were lounging about on the porch of the cloud house in hanging chairs. Jason turned to look at Sophie who had been staring at him all day.

"What?" he asked.

"What?" she asked.

"You've been looking at me like that all day."

"Like what?" Sophie asked.

"Impassively, I guess," Jason said. "You do everything impassively, so it's hard to differentiate."

"Your face," she said.

"What about my face?"

"Bronze rank," she said. "It made it less awful."

"Yep," Belinda agreed.

"I miss the chin," Neil said. "It kind of looked like some weird essence power."

"It wasn't that bad," Jason said. "Humphrey, tell them it wasn't that bad."

"It wasn't that bad," Humphrey said. "I'd even say it was good."

"Thank you," Jason said.

"I mean," Humphrey continued, "if I ever ran out of mana and couldn't conjure a sword, it was right there. What do I use for a backup, now?"

Jason looked put upon as the team laughed.

"It really does look good," Belinda said, taking pity on him. "Bronze rank's been good to you. The square-jaw thing you have happening now that is actually not bad. Right, Soph?"

"Its... not terrible."

"That's Sophie language for 'sexy as all get-out,' which I think is a little excessive, but each to their own," Belinda said. It earned her a glare from Sophie, while Jason shook his head and went back to his ritual.

It would have been faster for Clive to perform the ritual, as he had with Neil's growth items, but Clive hadn't offered and Jason hadn't asked. They both understood that if you could advance your growth items yourself, you did it yourself.

The sword was simple and elegant in its design; silvery blade, a simple, red gold hilt with black binding and a short black tassel. Jason carefully placed it at the centre of the magic circle and performed the ritual.

- 
- Growth item [Dread Salvation] has advanced from iron rank to bronze rank.
  - Growth item [Dread Salvation] has reached its maximum potential. It must be reforged by the original craftsman in order to advance further.
  - Item [Dread Salvation] has gained new abilities.
- 

Clive, Neil and Humphrey had already ranked-up their growth items with no additional effects, and the same had happened for Jason's amulet. His sword was the first of their items to gain new effects.

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Item: [Dread Salvation] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

- *A sword crafted with gratitude, in hope it would be of the greatest use in the moment of greatest need. It was forged with passion and expertise to be a reliable companion, bestowing upon it an incredible potential (weapon, sword).*
  - Effect: If a special attack that applies an affliction is made with this sword, but the subject of the attack has a physical immunity to it, an instance of [Stone Cutter] is applied to the blade and an instance of [Vibrant Echo] is inflicted to the enemy.
  - Effect: If a special attack that applies an affliction is made with this sword, but the subject of the attack has a magical immunity to it, an instance of [Spell Breaker] is applied to the blade and an instance of [Radiant Echo] is inflicted to the enemy.
  - [Stone Cutter] (magic, stacking): All attacks deal additional resonating-force damage; highly effective against physical defences. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
  - [Vibrant Echo] (damage-over-time, magic, stacking): Deal ongoing, resonating-force damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
  - [Spell Breaker] (magic, stacking): All attacks deal additional disruptive-force damage; highly effective against magical defences and incorporeal entities. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
  - [Radiant Echo] (damage-over-time, magic, stacking): Deal ongoing, disruptive-force damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

In addition to getting more powerful over time, the sword's new abilities allowed it to leave behind ongoing damage effects, bringing it more in line with Jason's own power set. Magic-type afflictions were easier to dispel than most, but almost nothing was immune to them, unlike Jason's various maledictions. To advance the sword further would require Gary's help, but silver rank was, for the moment, a distant horizon.

He was saving his familiar upgrades for last, so he moved on to the cloud flask. He shooed everyone off the porch and returned the cloud house to its flask, the house taking several minutes to dissolve into smoke and pour into the bottle like a genie.

"There must be a big, involved ritual for an item like the cloud flask," Neil said.

"Nope," Jason said. "You just have to get to bronze rank, then feed the greedy bugger about a squillion bucks worth of goodies."

He shook his head at the bottle as he pulled a funnel from his inventory, placed it in the mouth of flask and then started shoving in fistfuls of quintessence.

"Twenty-two hundred quintessence," he complained. "Two hundred of it dimension quintessence. Remind me to thank to thank Emir again for supplying the goods for the first rank up. No way could I have afforded this, on top of everything else."

Shovelling in all the quintessence gems and then ten thousand spirit coins took longer than the rituals for Jason and Neil's growth weapons put together. Deprived of their comfortable cloud seats, some of the team grew impatient.

"Could you have just used silver coins?" Neil asked. "Or gold. That would have sent it along nicely."

"It's not about the value of the coins," Clive said. "It's about the magic inside them. All that power doesn't just fuel the upgrade but balances out all the magic involved in the transformation, so it doesn't go awry."

"You know," Neil said to Clive, "just once, I'd like something to come up and have you say that you have no idea."

"Hey Clive," Belinda said.

"Yes?"

"How would Neil kill any monsters if we weren't around?"

"I have no idea," Clive said.

"You two are hilarious," Neil said flatly.

"Actually, that was pretty good," Jason said.

"Shut up and play with your bottle."

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The cult leader Zato, led Timos and Thadwick across the ruined grounds of the Vane estate. The last remnants of the climate-shifting magic were gone and the desert was

rapidly reclaiming the once lush territory. Now it was nothing but withered remnants and piled ruins, only the now-dormant magical pylons marking had once been a stark line between the estate and the desert.

They arrived at what had one been the manor house, now crumbling stone and dried wood. Zato held out an arm and the limb segmented into pieces, revealing not warm flesh and blood within, but cold iron. The pieces were strung together on a wire, which spooled out as the segments sprung forward, burying themselves in the piled debris.

Moments later, chunks of that debris started floating into the air, more and more of them, moving into an organised shape. The materials melted, wood and stone flowing like water as they blended together to form a strange hybrid material. The material flowed into lines, creating a ritual circle on the ground and then a dome that covered it, leaving only a hole large enough to crawl through.

“As you grow stronger,” Zato said, “Your meagre essence abilities will be supplanted, one by one, by the superior power of the Builder. You will not be bound by mortal limitations, scrabbling for scraps of might from worthless training or miserable monster cores.”

“This will make me strong?” Thadwick asked, nodding at the dome as it neared completion.

“Yes,” Zato said. “So many have passed you over, Thadwick, but I see your true potential. You will prove of supreme value to the Builder, once you are stronger. Enter, and feel the power flow through you.”

After a last, wary look, Thadwick got down and crawled through the hole. When the hole closed behind him and he was plunged into darkness, he panicked for a moment. Then he felt the promised power surging into him. It had only been a matter of moments, but he could feel the strength flowing through him and he started laughing like a madman.

Outside the dome, Zato and Timos could no more hear Thadwick than he could hear them as they walked away.

“When you said you would find something for Thadwick, I was not optimistic,” Timos said. “I didn’t realise that something like this was possible.”

“More than possible, it is necessary,” Zato said. “I was not fully inducted into the leadership, who took their plans with them to the grave fighting on the island. We have need of guidance. Thadwick and the other one...?”

“Dougall,” Timos reminded.

“Right, yes. Thadwick and Dougall are not true believers. They came to us out of desperate, mercenary sensibilities. Half loyalties will be met with half membership. They will pay the rest of their way with sacrifice and will be venerated for their service.”



“Why bother with the ruse?” Timos asked. “Why not just force Thadwick along?”

“Because even with the soul seed inside it, altering a soul is difficult business unless that soul is willing. Why force the poison down his throat when a spoonful of honey will have him gulping it down?”

“Honestly? I want to make him choke on the spoon?”

Zato chuckled.

“How close to ready is Dougall?” Timos asked.

“He will reach the requisite state shortly before the Church of Purity’s people arrive,” Zato said. “The timing is fortuitous. For the moment, make sure that neither Dougall nor Thadwick realise that they are receiving the same treatment.”

“Not a problem,” Timos said. “Dougall is so keen on ingratiating himself that he will do exactly as asked. Thadwick is so self-obsessed that he is oblivious to any of the goings on.”

Zato smiled.

“See? Anyone can be useful, if you find the task that best suits their abilities.”

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“It’s big,” Neil said.

“It wouldn’t let me use the blending-in version,” Jason said.

“I don’t think there’s a version of this that you can discreetly move through a jungle,” Humphrey said.

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#### Item: [Cloud Flask] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

- This item is bound to you and cannot be used by anyone else.
- Use the energies within the cloud flask to create buildings and vehicles made of clouds. Available forms are restricted by rank.
- Items contained within the cloud construct when it is returned to the flask are stored in a dimensional space and cannot be recovered until another cloud construct is formed.
- Available forms (iron rank): Cloud house (grand), cloud house (adaptive).
- Available forms (bronze rank): Carriage house (grand).
- Unavailable forms (bronze rank): Carriage house (adaptive).

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“A carriage house is meant to be a building that holds carriages,” Jason said. “Not a building that trundles about like one.”

To Jason, the cloud flask’s bronze-rank form looked as much as anything like a massive recreational vehicle, one of the stupidly expensive ones with two levels and a roof deck that movie stars lived in on set. It even had a spot for a driver at the front, although it

was directed by placing hands on a misty orb, rather than a steering wheel. Other than that, Jason could direct its movements mentally.

The cloudy white vehicle with its sunset embellishments stood out brightly amongst the dark stone and deep greenery of the overgrown jungle. There were no wheels, making it something of a hovercraft RV. The boulevards of the overgrown streets were wide, but thick with jungle, making them impassable for the huge vehicle. Jason had moved it back and forth a little, but there really wasn't room to drive around.

The interior was likewise akin to a luxurious RV, with beds, couches and comfortable chairs. There actually was a roof deck. From the inside, translucent mist made for clear windows, although they could not be seen through from the outside.

"Well," Humphrey consoled, "it'll be nice once we're back out of the astral space. "It'll be great for taking long trip so you, me and Clive can visit locations to portal to, later. That's what my mother did all through bronze rank. Travelling the world, having adventures."

"Actually, that sounds kind of awesome. Neil doesn't get an opening credit until season two, though, and it'll be an 'also starring' with his face hidden by a melon or something."

"What?"

"We can figure it out later," Jason said. "I guess I should turn it back into a house, and then finish up. What do you say, fellas? Saving the best for last?"

Gordon appeared with a flash of Jason's aura as Shade appeared from his shadow.

"Gordon says that I should be last," Shade said. Gordon orange orb flashed brightly, which was his signal for no.

"See?" Shade asked. "He really doesn't want to go last."

The orange orb started angrily strobing.

"He's quite vociferous on the topic," Shade continued.

"Shade, stop teasing Gordon," Jason said. "Gordon, it's just an expression. Being last doesn't actually mean you're the best."

A small patch of blood seeped from Jason's neck, turning into a leech that crawled along his shoulder. Jason turned to look at it.

"Colin, you've already ranked up. You can't do it again."

The disconsolate leech slinked back into Jason's neck.