

## 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."