

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.

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.**

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

- 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].
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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.
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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.
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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.