

Chapter 533

Special Boy

Jason's team arrived with the others on the shore of the island that had once been a flying city. The city was severely damaged, with cracked streets and buildings in various states of repair. Even more noticeable was the cant of the city, which had fallen on a lean of around twenty degrees. The result was a feeling of alienness, like staring at an optical illusion for too long.

The expedition had two gold rankers. Liara Rimaros was in charge, with Jana Costi as her second. Jana was a member of Liara's team from her pre-gold days and Jason had met her briefly. She looked very different now, which he knew was due to the absence of her brother. Ledev Costi had sacrificed himself in the bowels of the city in which they now stood. Jana's aura revealed nothing, even to Jason, but her face was filled with barely restrained anger as she listened to Liara brief the expedition.

"We've been over everything before, so I'll just quickly recap," Liara announced. "We know there are active construct creatures on the island and we believe there is a factory producing them somewhere in or below the city. Our primary goal is to discover and shut down this factory, along with any other threats we might find. We will be splitting up into individual teams but remain in contact through a communication power."

Liara gestured to Jason.

"Mr Asano will explain the functions of his ability shortly, but the key point is that you are to ask for assistance when encountering anything unexpected. Anything. I don't care how easy it seems to handle. I intend to walk away from this expedition with zero casualties. This damn place has taken too damn many of us already and I won't let it take any more."

Before setting out, Liara had already explained that a gold-rank team had already come to the island and cleared out all the construct creatures they found. As far as anyone monitoring the site could tell, whatever was producing more of the constructs was limited to silver-rank creations. The gold-rank constructs already eliminated should have been the last, but should was not a word to rely on.

"We are anticipating one or more clockwork kings to be present in the factory," Liara said. "They are not combat-oriented but no gold-rank enemy should be underestimated. Under no circumstances whatsoever is any team to enter any location they suspect to be the factory alone. The expedition will regroup and move together."

The teams split up and moved out while staying relatively close, with the gold rankers vanishing into stealth. Jason was able to keep track of their location via his map ability since they were connected to him through his party interface ability. As the teams were all silver rank, close wasn't all that close given the speeds at which they could move to reinforce one another.

"This is nostalgic," Jason said as his team moved out. "All of us back together, roaming through the ruins of a weird magic city."

"How about you don't die this time," Neil said.

"Neil, you're such a sweetie," Jason said.

"I just don't want to go back to mediocre food."

"Oh, I've embarrassed him now."

"Shut up," Neil muttered, refusing to meet anyone's gaze as the rest of the team laughed.

"Alright, get your heads into a fight space," Humphrey ordered. "We've been told the constructs have been congregating mostly in the central areas but keep an eye out for surprises. Jason, you're our stealth scout so you move out ahead. Sophie, you're our speed scout so you take the rear and flanks. Neil, you're our healer so try not to get stabbed."

"I'll be fine, thank you," Neil said as Sophie moved off in a blur and Jason vanished into the shadows.

"Belinda, keep an eye on Neil," Humphrey said. "Make sure he doesn't get stabbed."

"I'm not going to get stabbed!"

"Don't worry, Neil," Belinda told him. "Third priority. Number two is keeping the snacks safe."

"Very funny," Neil said. "Also, doesn't Jason have the snacks?"

"Scout is a dangerous position," Belinda explained. "I've got the backup snacks."

"I'm not feeling deeply valued," Neil said.

"Fine," Belinda complained. "I'll prioritise you over the backup snacks. What did you even put in that box anyway, Jason?"

"Cake sandwiches," Jason answered through team chat.

"As team leader," Humphrey said, "I'm going to have to overrule you, Belinda. If it's cake sandwiches, you absolutely must prioritise them over stopping Neil from getting stabbed. He has to take some responsibility for himself."

"You all realise that a lot of teams are looking for a good healer, right?" Neil asked. "Why don't you ever talk about Clive getting stabbed?"

“Who would stab Clive?” Sophie asked through team chat. “Everyone loves Clive.”

“Yeah.”

“Agreed.”

“Definitely.”

“Except his wife.”

“Dammit, Jason!”

A construct creature shaped like a two-headed, four-armed ogre, was standing in front of Humphrey, twice the adventurer’s height. It brought four clubs down towards his head but Humphrey didn’t even raise his sword to block. Clive was already casting a spell before the monster started swinging its weapons.

Ability: [Instant Karma] (Karma)

- Spell (spell, affliction, retribution, holy).
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Silver 2 (69%).

- Effect (iron): The target suffers damage of an amount and type identical to all damage inflicted by the target in the last few moments. This is considered retributive damage. Reducing or negating the original damage does not reduce or negate the retributive damage.

- Effect (bronze): You gain an alternative variant of the base spell. The variant spell operates identically to the iron-rank effect except that it changes the damage type of the retributive damage. The new damage type is based on the original, such as heat becoming cold or disruptive-force becoming resonating-force. Transcendent damage cannot be affected by this version of the spell.

- Effect (silver): You gain a pair of additional spells. Each spell inflicts a different version of the short-lived holy affliction [Instant Karma]. An individual may only be subjected to one version of [Instant Karma] at a time but the instantaneous spells from the iron and bronze ranks of this ability can be used on individuals suffering the affliction.

- [Instant Karma] (affliction, retribution, holy): When the target of this ability deals damage they suffer equivalent retributive damage. The damage type of the retributive effect depends on the spell variant used to generate the affliction. Available damage variants: identical to original damage; alternate damage based on original damage type.

When Clive first joined the team, his skills had not been up to the standards of Humphrey, Jason or Neil. Even Sophie quickly outpaced him, her long history of violence

helping her adapt very well to the adventuring life. Clive's combat training had been long ago and all but unused for a decade after he gave up adventuring for research.

The last time the team had spent time in a ruined city, honing their skills, it had been Clive and Belinda who had the furthest to go. Both preferred studying magic over methods of killing, although both brought their innovative minds to the more aggressive applications of their power sets.

Clive and Belinda were best at tricky, preparation-based tactics, but that was not the extent of their repertoires. It had been years since Jason pushed Clive back into the adventuring life and he had not been idle with improving himself, becoming more proficient with what, for Clive, passed as simple abilities. While the powers themselves were complex, their use was all about using quick judgement and quick reflexes to seize the moment.

Instant Karma was a power of Clive's that exemplified this. It had long been the power most difficult for him to raise as he was simply bad at using it. Back when Jason had still been with them, it was a power the team had to make a concerted effort to let him practise. In the time between Jason's departure and return, Clive's dedication to self-improvement and years of adventuring experience had made a stark difference. Now, Instant karma was one of Clive's most-used powers and he was always on the lookout for the chance to use it to best effect.

Clive's power was not the only one set off in the fleeting moment of the construct swinging its weapons. Humphrey didn't block the attack because he trusted Neil to intervene and, as predicted, a bubble shield appeared around him as the clubs hammered down.

Ability: [Burst Shield] (Shield)

- Special ability (recovery, retribution, magic, curse).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 20 seconds.

- Current rank: Silver 2 (61%).

- Effect (iron): Create a short-lived shield that negates an incoming attack and explodes out, knocking back nearby enemies and inflicting concussive damage. High-damage attacks of silver-rank or higher may not be entirely negated.
- Effect (bronze): Inflicts [Vibrant Echo] on anyone damaged by the blast.
- Effect (silver): Inflicts [Slow Learner] on anyone damaged by the blast.

- [Vibrant Echo] (affliction, damage-over-time, magic, stacking): Inflicts ongoing resonating-force damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 - [Slow Learner] (affliction, curse): Increases all retributive damage suffered by the target.
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The shield exploded, blasting away the giant construct. The boost Neil's shield gave to any retribution damage made Clive effect all the more powerful, and that was not the only such power Clive's Karma essence possessed.

Ability: [Mantle of Retribution] (Karmic)

- Spell (boon, retributive).
 - Cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: 10 seconds.

 - Current rank: Silver 1 (96%).

 - Effect (iron): Inflicts retributive impact damage on anyone who attacks the target ally.

 - Effect (bronze): Increasing the cost to moderate mana allows the mantle of retribution to be bestowed on all nearby allies.

 - Effect (silver): For a brief period after being attacked, all damage inflicted by the mantle recipient against the entity or object that damaged them is increased.
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From the very beginning, Jason's afflictions had been Plan A of the team's strategy against enemies that had small numbers and high individual power. They had never been foolish enough to make it their only plan, however, and they had numerous strategies for such fights. This had proven very important after Jason was lost to them.

One of the key strategies that the team used as their rank increased had started as a supplement to plan Let Jason Do The Damage. They would load up Humphrey and Sophie with protection and enhancement powers and let them switch off against the opponent. With their powers reaching silver rank, that had become a powerful strategy in its own right, which was valuable given that Jason was no longer with them. Using the synergistic retribution damage that Neil and Clive could place on the team and Sophie could place on herself, they made attacking the team's frontline as unpleasant as being attacked by it.

With the construct thrown backwards by the concussive blast of Neil's shield, Humphrey was leaping through the air after it before it had time to land. He brought down

his massive sword with practised timing, the weapon smashing into the construct just as the construct smashed into the ground.

Humphrey had tailored his equipment towards extending the time he could fight rather than brief, destructive bursts, like Farrah. Even so, the natural inclination of his power set was dealing a large amount of damage in a small amount of time. While his gear had limited support for this, his abilities did plenty of work on their own. Not only was he stacking multiple passive and active abilities into the attack but also using his doubly-evolved racial gift.

Ability: [Hero's Sacrifice]

- Transfigured from evolved ability [Attack of the Mirage Dragon].
- Previous effects of racial ability [Attack of the Mirage Dragon] have been lost.
- Sacrifice your health to enhance the power of your special attacks.

At bronze-rank, the power had been a significant step down from the ability it replaced. Humphrey's disappointment had disappeared on reaching silver rank. A bronze-ranker had more life force than a normal person but while the difference was large, it wasn't overwhelming. Making any noticeable sacrifice of that life force was both limited in scope and dangerous in application.

A silver-ranker, by comparison, was a towering titan of life force; a bonfire compared to a match. Humphrey could pour life-force into his attack to generate a massive amount of damage. Best of all, the ability enhanced whatever damage type Humphrey happened to be using.

Ability: [Shield Breaker] (Might)

- Special attack.
- Cost: Low mana, moderate stamina.
- Cooldown: 10 seconds.
- Current rank: Silver 2 (79%).
- 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.
- Effect (silver): Inflicts [Vibrant Echo] on anyone damaged by the attack.

- [Vibrant Echo] (affliction, damage-over-time, magic, stacking): Inflicts ongoing resonating-force damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
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It was an attack based entirely around resonating-force damage, making it purpose-built for breaking through armour. Builder constructs didn't just have armour; they essentially were armour, making the power all the more effective. Humphrey's attack went off like a shaped charge; an explosion efficiently directing its force exactly where it needed to go.

Even having hitting it so hard it left an indent the shape of its body in the ground like a cartoon character, the construct wasn't finished. Despite all the stacked powers and effects, the idea of a single blow taking down a silver-rank anything was pure fantasy. But silver was truly the first step of leaving mortal frailty behind. Humphrey was well aware of this, not pausing for a moment as he stood over the construct he had half-buried in the shattered flagstones of the street. He brought his weapon up and down, up and down; methodical as a railroad linesman. The construct, despite being artificial and not flesh and blood, was so staggered by Humphrey's initial blow that it lay there and took it, not given a chance to pull itself out of the indent it had made in the street.

Ability: [Relentless Assault] (Might)

- Special attack (magic, dispel).
 - Cost: Low stamina, increasing with each successive attack.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Silver 2 (08%).

 - 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.

 - Effect (silver): After a threshold of successive attacks is reached, escalating disruptive-force damage is dealt with each attack and one instance of a boon is dispelled from the target. Subsequent attacks dispel an escalating number of instances.
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Relentless Assault was an ability that had been of little use at lower ranks, with most enemies falling to Humphrey's destructive power very quickly. At silver rank it showed its value, letting him topple giants like a woodsman felling trees. The cost of the ability escalated drastically if he used it for long enough but that was where Humphrey's choice to build his gear for endurance proved itself. He could continue to hack away while his

items and the abilities of his team continually replenished him when the cost of maintaining the attack would otherwise be exhausting.

As Humphrey hacked away, Sophie had tied up the other large construct and Jason's afflictions were now eating away at it. Neil was drawing out a ritual circle in golden light, ready to heal Humphrey who had burned through a good amount of life force.

Ability: [Grand Renewal] (Renewal)

- Spell (healing, ritual).
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: 1 hour.

- Current rank: Silver 2 (38%).

- Effect (iron): Conduct a powerful healing ritual that cleanses all non-wound afflictions. This ability takes the place of the ritual's material components.

- Effect (bronze): The ritual circle is magically drawn, allowing the ritual to be more quickly enacted and in less ideal conditions.

- Effect (silver): Multiple people can be healed in a single ritual, splitting the healing strength between them. The healing provided by this ability has a greater than normal effect at eliminating wound afflictions.

Neil's strongest single-target healing power was a ritual-fuelled ability that was difficult to use in combat, but just the thing for restoring Humphrey's expended life force. Neil wasted no time, knowing that the team needed to be ready should something else turn up to attack them.

"We need more to show up," Belinda complained. "All I got to do this fight was stand here and make sure no one stabbed Neil."

"Yeah," Belinda agreed, scratching at her moustache.

The team only took a short break in the wake of the fight. Humphrey, fresh from being healed up, flew to where Jason was standing atop a half-ruined tower, watching the approaches to their resting spot.

"You look troubled," Humphrey said. "Surely a few constructs don't bother you."

"That's the problem," Jason said. "It feels like the Builder is iterating his construct designs to counter my ability to affect them. Back in Greenstone, I was able to lock down star seeds so that, even without my intervention, they'd stay locked long enough for the Magic Society to work up something to keep them suppressed."

"It's not the same now?"

“No. The cultists I encountered not long before you and the team arrived were much harder to keep bundled up. It was like holding a smooth, greased-up stone; it could easily have slipped out of my grip. The constructs at that time were easy enough to make clumsy, but the ones here were more resistant.”

“You think the Builder is changing them to stop you?”

“I think he's updating his minions each time he sees me affect them, yeah. It's probably not hard. For the star seeds it would be like a firmware update.”

“A what?”

“Sorry. I mean that Builder can change them easily and remotely. My guess would be that it's harder with the constructs since the cultists have star seeds with direct connections to the Builder. He probably can't change the constructs that have been already built, but most likely we're dealing with newly-crafted ones here. I imagine he updates the designs through those clockwork kings.”

“Just to be clear, then,” Humphrey said, “You're up here brooding because you're worried you won't be the special boy who can single-handedly take on whole armies of Builder constructs?”

“Not exactly,” Jason said. “I could probably take on an army of them with just my regular powers if I'm being honest.”

Humphrey gave Jason a flat look and opened the voice chat to the team.

“I've made a decision as team leader,” he announced. “We are now letting Jason get stabbed.”

“Oh, come on,” Jason complained. “That's hardly—”

Humphrey grabbed the front of Jason's combat robes and threw him off the tower.