

## Chapter 534

### Strictly Necessary

"There's something odd about this city," Humphrey said, prompting the rest of the team give him a confused look. Even Sophie stuck her head over the roof she was standing on to look his way.

"Um, yes," Clive said. "I may have spotted the occasional eccentricity of civil construction myself."

"Just to be clear," Neil said, "you think there might be something odd about the city that is really a giant dimension-hopping ship that fell out of the sky, is tilted at an angle, smashed all to crap and host to an ever-growing army of automatons attempting to pluck whole chunks off the side of the world."

"I think you might be onto something there, Hump," Jason said.

"You're looking, but not seeing," Humphrey told them. "Listen to what Neil described. What you see is all the strangeness that Neil mentioned but that isn't actually strange. That's exactly what you'd expect from a crashed interdimensional invasion ship and that's how you're all looking at this place. But try looking at it as a city. A ruined, tilted city, but a city."

Jason emerged from a nearby shadow, his expression curious as Humphrey piqued his interest.

"What are you seeing that the rest of us aren't?" Jason asked him.

"It was something that occurred to me when we were fighting here during the battle," Humphrey said. "Back then it was too hectic to give any real thought to."

"Compared to this trip which has been nice and relaxed," Neil pointed out.

"I've been to a lot of cities across the world," Humphrey said. "I was raised in Greenstone but my mother has been travelling with my sister and me since we were small. She wanted us to see other places and other cultures. Different cities have different feels to them, but there's always a sense of being a place where people live. It might be indulgent, hedonistic, practical, industrial, authoritarian, but there's always a sense of people and purpose to them. The city speaks to who they are, what they do and what they value. They feel lived in."

"I think I get what he's talking about," Neil said, looking around. "This place doesn't feel like the ruins of somewhere people used to live. It feels empty, no... hollow. Like a shell."

“That makes sense,” Belinda said. “The true purpose of this place isn’t the city. It’s a façade for the true operations that were underground.”

“No,” Jason said. “I don’t think it’s that simple. Who would the façade be for? The Builder and his people only do anything for the Builder himself. This city is for him.”

“What do you mean?” Clive asked. “It’s not like he can come here and live.”

“You’re thinking in the wrong scale,” Jason said. “To us, this place is vast, but to the Builder that size is nothing.”

“What are you saying?” Sophie asked, lightly dropping from the roof.

“This place is a toy,” Jason said. “It’s not a city; it’s a one-to-one scale model of a city.”

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Like everything else in the ruined Builder city, the towers were on a lean. Belinda, clad in sleek and supple leather, slid down the near-vertical wall, balanced on her feet and gathering speed. The surface of the tower was uneven brickwork but her magical boots smoothed her descent. Under the soles of her boots, magic shimmered like a heat haze, ignoring any ridges or bumps and giving her a clean slide. All she needed to worry about was balance.

By the time she came within a few storeys of the ground, she had built up a good amount of speed. Combining that with her silver-rank strength, she launched herself from the wall in a massive leap, over the street below and toward a building across the way. Turning adroitly in the air, she landed on a wall that was at an oblique angle to her trajectory, allowing her to leverage her momentum and run horizontally along another near-vertical surface.

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

- Special ability.
- Cost: Very high mana.
- Cooldown: 6 hours.
  
- Current rank: Silver 1 (74%).
  
- Effect (iron): Gain a significant increase to the [Speed] attribute and temporary proficiency with acrobatics, small blades and ranged weapons. Your maximum stamina increases and you gain an ongoing stamina recovery effect.
  
- Effect (bronze): Gain supernatural movement powers including wall-running and water-walking.

- **Effect (silver):** Gain additional special attacks and abilities based on equipped weapons, armour and utility tools.
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From the air above, a sound like a high pitch whistle was growing deeper as something rapidly descended from a great height.

As Belinda ran along the second wall, nearing the corner, she slapped a hand on it, magically adhering the end of a rope that trailed from her sleeve. She leapt from that wall as well, using the rope to swing around the corner of the building. The street below was thick with Builder constructs similar to centaurs but with lower bodies like ants instead of heidels.

The rope released from the wall and snaked back into Belinda's sleeve, tossing her out over the constructs. She tumbled gracefully through the air to perform a superhero landing, right in their midst, both hands landing flat on the flagstone street. She lifted her hands, under each one conjuring a rod, affixed to the ground. One rod was crystal and the other, iron.

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

- **Conjuration.**
  - **Cost:** Low mana-per-second.
  - **Cooldown:** None.
  
  - **Current rank:** Silver 2 (19%).
  
  - **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 towards 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.
  
  - **Effect (bronze):** Strength and pulling force of the tether is increased.
  
  - **Effect (silver):** Inflicts [Inescapable]. Moving or being moved against the pull of the tether causes the tether to inflict resonating-force damage, escalating with distance from the rod.
  
  - **[Inescapable] (affliction, magic):** Target cannot be affected by teleport or non-hostile dimension effects.
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The crystal rod shot tethers of barely visible force at all the surrounding enemies. The tethers immediately started dragging the clustered crowd of constructs, which strongly resisted the pull. At the same time, lightning arced from the iron rod in a continuous stream of electricity that jumped from one enemy to the next, connecting them in a chain.

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

- **Conjuration.**
  - **Cost: Low mana-per-second.**
  - **Cooldown: None.**
  
  - **Current rank: Silver 2 (21%).**
  
  - **Effect (iron):** Conjures an iron rod, from which a tether connects to the nearest enemy within a short-range. If no enemy is in range, it will attach to the first enemy that enters range. The tether deals a negligible amount of ongoing electricity damage that scales upward based on the length of the tether. If the rod is destroyed or removed from its location then a stroke of lightning strikes the nearest enemy before chaining from one enemy to the next until all enemies in the vicinity have been struck. The lightning triggered by the destruction of the rod deals heavy electrical damage and inflicts the [Stunned] condition. Dimensional displacement, such as teleportation, severs the tether, which attaches to the enemy closest to the rod, if in range. Only one lightning tether rod may exist at a time.
  
  - **Effect (bronze):** Secondary tethers chain from the initial target to a second nearby enemy and from that enemy to a third. Damage to each target is based on the length of each tether to which they are connected.
  
  - **Effect (silver):** The tether can chain to as many as seven enemies. If tethered enemies are close together, each short tether emits electrical projectile attacks at random non-tethered enemies.
  
  - **[Stunned] (affliction, lightning):** Target is incapable of taking physical action for a brief moment.
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The lightning tethers were all short, being tied to the close-in constructs and immediately started firing electrical projectiles. They inflicted minimal damage on the constructs but appeared to affect their motor functions.

It was at that moment that the sound of the descending object culminated in Sophie landing right next to Belinda in an identical pose.

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#### Ability: [Wind Wave] (Wind)

- **Special Ability (movement).**
- **Cost: Moderate mana.**

- **Cooldown: 6 seconds.**
  - **Current rank: Silver 2 (91%).**
  - **Effect (iron): Effect (Iron): Produce a powerful blast of air that can push away enemies and physical projectiles. Can be used to launch into the air or move rapidly while already airborne.**
  - **Effect (bronze): Can affect magical projectiles and some magical area effects.**
  - **Effect (silver): For a high mana cost, create a wave of wind with extremely powerful pushing force that blasts out in a circle from the ability user. The wind wave can affect or not affect anyone or anything it passes over, as desired. The strength of the wave can be amplified by dropping from a high altitude, with the level of increase affected by the speed and distance of the drop. User suffers no damage from ground impacts using the ability in this way.**
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The entire crowd of constructs was blasted away as if a bomb had gone off. Some slammed into the building Belinda had just jumped from while others were tossed into the empty canal on the other side of the street. Most were thrown up or down the roadway, being hurtled a huge distance.

The damage effects of Belinda's tether rods took effect, the distance from the rods causing massive damage. The lightning rod's damage continued to be minimal in terms of harming the constructs, but the more the damage grew, the more their functions were impeded. As for the damage from the crystal rod tethers, the resonating-force damage was devastating to the rigid constructs.

The constructs were now scattered over a wide area, blue and orange butterflies prettily landing on their fallen forms. The force tether's pull force kicked in and the constructs were swiftly dragged back to where Sophie and Belinda were just standing up. Wind kicked up around them, carrying them both into the air and out of the path of the converging constructs. Belinda looked down to where the drag force of the force tethers was literally piling the constructs on top of the small force field around it. She pointing her open palm at the ground, right where the tether rods were.

A pit, not an actual hole but an open dimensional space filled with darkness, appeared under the rods. The rods fell into the dark, along with the pile of constructs. This triggered the detonation conditions for both rods, the lighting chaining through the pit full of enemies. Much more destructive was the explosion of resonating-force damage, contained within the space of the pit.

Outside of the pit were more constructs the tethers hadn't dragged into range before Belinda conjured the pit. Dark tentacles emerged, grabbing at the constructs and pulling them in as well.

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Ability: [Pit of the Reaper] (Trap)

- Conjunction (dimension).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 2 minutes.
  
- Current rank: Silver 2 (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.
  
- Effect (bronze): The ability user and their allies may stand on the pit without falling in if desired.
  
- Effect (silver): Shadow tentacles drag enemies into the pit.

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The necrotic damage of the pit would generally not affect the constructs but Jason's afflictions, spread by Gordon's butterflies, changed that. The butterflies even followed the constructs into the dark, themselves unaffected by necrosis.

Belinda and Sophie landed on a nearby rooftop where Humphrey, Neil and Clive were already watching from the high vantage. Jason rose from Humphrey's shadow like he was riding an elevator.

"Was all that jumping around strictly necessary?" Neil asked.

"Sorry, what's your mobility power again?" Belinda asked him. "Oh right: asking people to carry you places."

"My mobility power is Take Me Somewhere Or See How It Goes The Next Time Your Arm Needs To Be Healed Back On."

"That was one time," Belinda said.

Neil gave her a flat look.

"The second time didn't count," she said. "Half of it was still attached. At least a third."

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Liara opened a voice channel using Jason's party interface to speak to the entire expedition.

"All teams need to regroup. I've been contacted by the scouts monitoring the island and several large, unknown forces have approached in underwater vessels and made

landfall at points around the island. Pallav, send up your signal flare and all teams converge on that point."

Jason and Sophie returned to their team to discuss the directive.

"What do you think?" Neil asked. "Builder forces looking to retake the island?"

"There's no way they can take and hold an island this close to Rimaros," Clive said.

"Trying would be insane."

"It's an army of idiots who swap their arms out for logs or whatever to serve some interdimensional idiot in a feud with Jason," Neil said. "No one accused them of being sane."

"There's little point speculating without more information," Humphrey said. "Let's get moving."