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 is 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 knobbly 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)

- Conjuration (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

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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 creatures 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."

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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?"