

## Chapter 929

### Tactical Playbook

Springclaw gorillas were weak, as gold-rank monsters went, but they were smart and spawned in large herds. When one such herd had hidden away in the mountains, the first group of adventurers sent after them had not done well. After a week of fending off guerilla tactics from the gorillas, they had only a handful of kills and a lot of frustration.

Resupplying in a large town at the base of the mountain range, the adventurers encountered Jason and his team doing the same. Humphrey offered to take the contract off their hands, without taking the contract rewards. The adventurers were suspicious until they discovered they were dealing with Team Biscuit, looking to rebuild their tactical playbook after ranking up to gold.

The team had spent limited time together over the last few years as they followed their individual pathways to gold rank. They needed to revise the strategies they had developed and honed over more than a decade, along with reintegrating Jason into the team dynamic. They had been working on it during their travels, but Humphrey was satisfied with nothing less than perfection. And once perfection was reached, they could train even harder to maintain it.

Each team member had their own new tricks, with even basic abilities growing ostentatiously powerful at gold rank. Humphrey's Mighty Strength power, arguably the most common power in the adventuring world, could now expand his size. The mana cost became more exorbitant the larger he grew, but it allowed him to physically confront the often-enormous gold-rank monsters.

Sophie's speed left even a fully buffed Jason in the dust, and her aura let her walk through a town, healing the sick like a saintess. Neil's summon was a trump card against hostile magic, drawing it in like a black hole before transforming into something that countered all it had absorbed. Belinda was the right answer to every question, whether it was controlling enemies, empowering allies or using items to transform into a warrior or powerful magician.

Clive remained both the weakest individual combatant, and most powerful damage dealer. Zara could match him over wide area, and Jason could over time, but when it came to hurting one thing *now*, neither came close. His previous spikes of destructive output now came much closer together, with catastrophic secondary effects.

Clive also had several powerful buffs that enhanced Humphrey and Sophie especially. One delivered powerful retribution effects to anyone who attacked them, while

the other surrounded them with consumable runes whose effects were varied and random, but always potent. Neil's means to enhance the team had likewise reached a new level.

Zara's power progression was somewhat unusual in that her powers grew smaller, rather than bigger. Her area attacks had always been fitting for her former title of Hurricane Princess, being as powerful as they were imprecise. She now had options that would concentrate the power of a storm to the size of a fist, tearing through enemies like a chainsaw through custard.

Humphrey's role in most of their tactics was to be the buff-laden centrepiece of the team. This usually left him as some combination of initiator, primary weapon, distraction and bait. Clive and Neil used Onslow's shell as a secure battle platform while the rest of the team were mobile and flexible, in accordance with the team's needs and current strategy.

The springclaw gorillas were cunning opponents, not just pouring out of their hidden mountain lair in a wave. They went for merchant caravans and brief hit-and-retreat raids, scouting out targets and drawing off defenders with feint attacks. They demonstrated a clear recognition of the threat posed by adventurers, even before encountering them. This was a hallmark of intelligent monsters who came into being with knowledge already imprinted on their minds.

Rather than charge into the mountains like the last team of adventurers, Humphrey decided to make use of Belinda. She had several abilities that let her use specialised item sets to awaken temporary powers, usually taking on warrior or spellcaster roles. Her Instant Adept power could make her a swift striker or powerful archer, but also take on utility powers as well. With equipment suited to a wilderness scout, she awakened a suite of useful tracking abilities.

Humphrey didn't allow the team to make use of their various flight options, both for the training value and to escape easy detection. The gorillas would spot them easily if they flew around, and were stealthy enough to avoid distant observers. Like many ambush predators and high-intellect monsters, they could suppress their auras until even Jason would have trouble sensing them.

The previous team had taken a flight-and-scan approach to poor effect. Most of the time they had found nothing, only to be ambushed on getting complacent. This was the source of their few kills, but they hadn't come close to finding the main lair.

The team entered the mountains on foot, relying on Belinda's temporary powers. The terrain was inhospitable, with dense forest growth and steep inclines. The sharp cliffs and hidden crevasses made the terrain dangerous, not from a potential fall but from the

constant threat of ambush. Springclaw gorillas also came in less aggressive natural variants, rather than monsters, and such terrain was home territory for them.

Humphrey had his team make their way on foot. Navigating forests and scaling cliffs was well within the capability of their gold-rank attributes, but they needed the skill and experience to make use of them.

“Jason,” Humphrey said, his voice a warning.

“Yes?” Jason asked innocently.

“Your climbing skills seemed to have improved considerably, all of a sudden.”

“That’s because of your excellent leadership.”

“So, you didn’t shadow jump to that last city and buy a climbing skill book?”

“Absolutely not. You just lost track of me because of my inherent stealth.”

“You realise that you’ve given the whole party access to the tactical map, right? The one with our locations on it?”

“I, uh, did forget about that, yes.”

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The mountain pass was beautiful and green in the summer, spanning out ahead of Jason and his team. The ground was a mess of thick scrub and rocks dotting the landscape. A narrow river spilled down in their direction, with a disused and overgrown road running alongside it.

“You said these things are smart, right?” Jason asked.

“I did,” Clive said.

“Are we talking ‘dog that knows how to open the bathroom door’ smart or ‘get a bunch of ghillie suits and bait us into a trap’ smart?”

“That depends,” Clive said. “What’s a ghillie suit?”

“A non-magical disguise. The kind you wear when you’re gearing up to kill some folk.”

“Definitely that one,” Clive said. “You think they’re out there?”

“They’re out there,” Belinda said. “This is home territory for them. They’ll have realised that we’re tracking them by now, and I think the last team showed them that small ambushes won’t stop adventurers. They need an environment where they still have a chance of getting the drop on us, but will let them bring their numbers to bear.”

“With us just standing here talking,” Neil said, “they probably know we know they’re there.”

“And that we know they know we know they know,” Belinda added.

“Don’t start,” Humphrey said. “What do you think, a double scoop slam?”

“They probably won’t bite unless we wander in looking oblivious,” Sophie said.

“Then that’s what we do,” Humphrey said. “Lindy, do you want to go backline or be in the mix?”

“Backline,” she said. “I’ll help Zara and Clive blanket bomb the zone.”

“Zara, cover the others as they withdraw when it kicks off.”

“On it,” she confirmed.

“Jason, I want you trimming the edges. They’re smart, so there’ll be runners once things go badly for them. Mop up most of them, but put a tracker on a couple and let them run. We can trace them back to their lair.”

“Will do.”

“You realise they might not even be out there,” Neil said. “Unless someone is sensing something I’m not.”

“You’re sensing it,” Jason told him. “You’re just not paying attention.”

“To what?” Neil asked.

“You’re focusing on the gorillas,” Jason said. “Look for the auras of everything else. The animals out there that haven’t run already are skittish and hiding.”

“And stop suppressing your sense of smell,” Belinda added. “Your mundane senses are incredibly sharp at gold rank.”

“Oh, I’m well aware of that,” Neil said. “I took one sniff of a city and choked off my sense of smell almost entirely. I would have shut it off entirely, if that didn’t make food taste bland.”

“Your priorities might be a little off kilter,” Zara suggested.

“No, I’m happy with where they’re at,” Neil told her.

“Enough chatter,” Humphrey said. “Stash, you ready?”

The hill mouse in Humphrey’s pocket made an adorable ‘chu’ sound.

“Alright,” Humphrey said. “Move forward, and try to look oblivious.”

“But they definitely know we know,” Neil said as the group moved forward. “Why the pretence?”

“It’s ‘know we know they know’ chicken,” Jason said. “Whoever pretends to be surprised best wins.”

“I’m pretty sure it whoever kills everyone on the other team wins,” Sophie said.

“And I’m pretty sure I said enough chatter,” Humphrey reminded them.

“You always do,” Sophie told him. “It’s adorable that you still try.”

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The gorillas waited until the team had well and truly walked into the middle of them before they triggered the ambush. Jason was impressed to see they actually were wearing

something like ghillie suits, the monsters seeming to erupt from the landscape. They leapt at the party who sprang into action.

Jason and Sophie both vanished, Sophie in a blur and Jason into the shadow of a rock. Stash leapt from Humphrey's clothes, transforming into some creature Jason didn't recognise. It was something between a bird and a lizard, or perhaps one and a half of a bird and lizard. It had three heads, three wings and three arms that dangled down from a central body. Existing in flagrant disregard of both aerodynamics and biology, it looks like it should get tangled in itself, fall to the ground and beg to be put out of its misery. Instead, it flitted like a hummingbird, snatching up Neil, Clive and Belinda before taking to the sky. Zara shot up next to Stash's monster form on a blast of wind.

Humphrey was left behind, becoming the last target standing for the leaping monsters. Springclaw gorillas were more agile than their Earth counterparts, as appropriate for their rank. They were named for their signature leap attacks and the sharp claws delivering anticoagulant venom. Their favourite tactic was to deliver rapid strikes and then back off, letting their enemies bleed to death.

The gorillas had learned that their preferred tactic was a poor one against adventurers. The presence of healers and potions made counting on bleed afflictions an unreliable strategy, but they were smart enough to devise a counter. Much of the group turned from Humphrey as the easy target and focused on the withdrawing backliners. They didn't know which one was the healer, but quickly guessed it was one of those trying to escape.

Using their powerful leaps, they launched into the air at Stash. What they met was a descending wall of wind and water, dropping on them like a concrete slab. It smashed them back down, right on top of Humphrey and the gorillas he was fighting. At the last moment, Humphrey teleported away, leaving the monsters to crash into one another.

What was left was a mess of confused gorillas, bodies tumbling and limbs tangling together as Zara's water bomb washed over them. The ambush had gone very wrong very quickly, with almost a hundred monsters scattered and disoriented. They recovered quickly, however, getting up and looking around for their targets. A handful of gorillas started grunting out orders.

The moment the monsters showed signs of reorganising, Sophie reappeared. Dashing through the monsters, she left behind afterimages, seemingly in four places at once. The gorillas resumed their leap attacks at the afterimages, all of which imploded. They turned into points of dimensional suction force, the aggressive jumps from the gorillas again turning into helpless tumbling.

The areas around the imploded afterimages were covered with disorienting illusions, triggering vertigo in the monsters as they attempted to recover. Wind blades shot out from the suction points still yanking gorillas off their feet.

While this was going on, Clive had called out Onslow, the flying rune tortoise expanding his shell to let Clive, Belinda and Neil inside.

“Second scoop,” Humphrey said through voice chat. Belinda, peering out from the edge of the shell, looked to the ground below. The four suction points formed a square, and she conjured a force tether right in the middle. A crystal rod rose from the ground and a force beam shot out, connecting with every gorilla in the area.

The way Belinda’s Force Tether power worked was to drag every tethered creature towards it. It inflicted little damage to those that allowed themselves to be dragged, inflicting escalating damage to those that resisted. In this instance, the suction points from Sophie’s mirage power did the resisting for them, yanking the gorillas away from the tether rod. The gorillas were physically powerful enough to resist both effects, but the disorienting illusion from Sophie’s power made it hard to get their feet under them.

Slowly but surely, Belinda’s force tether won out as Sophie’s power faded. The gorillas were yanked into a pile as the screech of a descending missile filled the air. Humphrey landed right on top of the force tether, destroying it immediately. This triggered the detonation effect of the tether on top of the explosion of Humphrey’s Dive Bomb power. Neil’s Burst Shield power snapped into place right before Humphrey landed, absorbing the damage from the tether blast on Humphrey and detonating itself, inflicting a third blast on the beleaguered monsters.

After the execution of the double scoop slam, the monsters were scattered, hurt confused. They scrambled to even understand what was happening, let alone mount a counterattack. Clive and Zara started blanketing the area with destructive magic, Belinda alternately reducing their cooldowns and copying their powers. The gorillas that had been furthest from the centre saw the battle was lost and moved to escape rather than join their fellows. They bolted for the surrounding forests and cliffs, their loping runs punctuated by huge leaps.

As they fled, shadowy arms jutted from the shadows of the rocky landscape, stabbing at them with red and black daggers. The damage seemed negligible, so they ignored the minor wounds and continued their flight. Jason, unnoticed as his cloak pulled shadows around him, softly incanted his Castigate spell. The Mark of Sin it inflicted would let him track them, should any of them survive the other afflictions his shadow arms had delivered.

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Jason and Humphrey cleaned up the handful of monsters that survived Zara and Clive's indiscriminate blasting. Without any kind of healing, the monsters that fled fell to Jason's afflictions. He could sense the ones he had marked converging on what was presumably their lair. After looting the dead monsters, the team tracked them down, mopping up what was left of the herd. Only a handful of monsters had been left to guard the cave system they had made a home of, against other monsters and magical beasts.

"That was clean," Humphrey said in the aftermath. "I think we're starting to get our cohesion back. Let's not get complacent, though."

Jason slapped Neil companionably on the back.

"Mate, I saw the timing of that shield you dropped on Humpy. That was immaculate."

Neil gave Jason a suspicious look, waiting for a backbiting comment that never came. Jason had moved on, slinging an arm around Clive's shoulder.

The team looted the monsters and recovered what they could of what the gorillas had taken from raiding towns and caravans. They then portalled back to the town where they'd left the cloud ship. The adventurers whose job they'd taken over said they would go check the battle site before reporting the contract completed. Humphrey gave them directions and left them to it. Jason and his companions returned to the cloud ship and moved on.