

Chapter 307

What You Call Observing

Jason saw flashes of what Nigel's team could bring to the table if they fought more like adventurers. While the general approach was for focus fire tactics, they each had specialties that were pulled out against various creatures.

The scouts rarely used their firearms full of expansive ammunition, instead using their powers to support the team in combat when they weren't actually ranging ahead in search of threats. Jason was surprised to find that two of them were affliction specialists. Green was a wide-area type, using various word-of-power abilities to impede enemies.

Orange was more focused on singular targets, like Jason. His evil eye power set did little damage, though, instead setting his team up to enhance their focus-fire strategies by making enemies more susceptible to damage and impeding defensive abilities.

The last scout, Woolzy, was a fast-moving melee striker with the Swift, Foot and Knife essences combining to form the Master confluence. Of all the team, he was the most adventurer-like in his tactics, using bursts of staccato movement to set up assassination-style special attacks. He would only conjure his twin knives right before striking, leaving them buried in the victim.

Woolzy's role was to beat fast and agile monsters at their own game before they used their mobility to outmanoeuvre the team. He guarded their flanks, leaving them free to rapidly focus-fire through the primary enemies.

His speed was very different from Sophie's flowing, uncatchable grace. While Jason knew that Sophie would envy Woolzy's powerful attacks, Jason much preferred her ability set. He did admit to himself, though, that he possibly had his own case of burst damage envy.

Other members had their own times to shine. The shield-wielding Higgy would also erupt into bursts of speed, but to intercept attacks, rather than deliver them. Like Woolzy, his job was to let the team do their job unfettered, intervening to absorb the attacks into his shield. Every hit seemed to charge it up, as every so often he would unleash an overwhelming counterattack in the form of a conical wave of force.

Darce had the most exotic power of the team, summoning a brass steam golem to give them more frontline presence. Her summon had a number of differences from observations Jason had made of other summons. The steam golem was cheaper to summon, mana wise, but had a limited power supply. That supply was rapidly consumed, and all the faster if the golem used its special attacks like firing scalding steam.

The golem's weak longevity was paired with a much shorter cooldown, though, of half an hour compared to the usual six, and Darce didn't need a summoning circle to call it out. All this, plus the need to give it more direction than a normal summon, led Jason to believe it wasn't an actual summon. He suspected it was an ability he had heard of but never seen before, known as a puppet power. Rather than summoning an independent creature, it created a very sophisticated conjured object.

The meat and potatoes of Nigel's section was the hitter team consisting of Cobbo, Digit and Nigel himself. Cobbo used conjured spears, mostly throwing them with almost bullet-like speed. He would occasionally make devastating charging attacks or conjure a pike when monsters charged the team in turn.

Digit used a conjured bow, making flashy special attacks, while Nigel was quite conventional with his conjured rifle. With his black paramilitary gear and assault weapon, he would fit right into an autocratic dictator's extrajudicial death squad.

Nigel showed more of his capabilities when the team was attacked on all sides by a wave of small and weak, but multitudinous monsters. His rifle vanished as he tossed it aside and conjured a pistol in each hand. He moved forward slowly while continuously turning around, pistols blazing in every direction as he shot the leaping stoat monsters right out of the air.

Nigel wasn't looking to aim, firing to either side and even backwards, yet every shot landed on target. Bullets even whizzed past his own team on their path to dropping one monster after another. Jason continued to not participate in that encounter, although he did call up Gordon who used pinpoint beams to strike down any of the diminutive monsters that drew too close.

Jonno also used a conjured assault rifle for most tasks, and likewise had other gun forms available at need. Unlike Nigel's pistol configuration, Jonno's

other weapon was a rotary barrelled machine gun, which he slung from his hip like it was an eighties action movie.

“Bit of a mana hog,” Jonno explained, “so I only pull it out for the big stuff.”

That gun was to be outshone when the group encountered a trio of silver-rank jungle trolls, half the height again of a human. Jonno conjured up a third gun, so large that even hip-slung it seemed like he should be toppling over. The rotary machine gun was already an image of excess, while this was a full-blown rotary cannon.

Jonno didn't fire immediately, instead letting his team go to work. Darce called up her golem, which launched into one of the trolls but was quickly being overpowered. Higgy used his charged shield to send one stumbling back while Nigel conjured a grenade launcher to blast the third. A grenade to the face rang the troll's bell, but was far from a kill shot and they could visibly see it start to heal.

The purpose of their stalling tactics was to give Orange time to cast a curse spell three times over, chanting the same words for each.

“Let the scales of power sway.”

“They all landed,” he said, clearly surprised that none of the spells were resisted. He didn't know that Jason's aura had already lowered the resistances of the trolls. “You're good to go.”

The barrels on Jonno's ridiculous weapon spun up with a whir before erupting with thunder as a terrifying storm of bullets started chewing into the trolls. Jason realised that Orange's curse must have temporarily negated the damage reduction from rank disparity.

The silver-rank monsters weren't especially tough examples of their rank, but they still had silver-rank physical fortitude. This was the only reason they weren't instantly turned to chum by the ludicrous weapon, Jonno's endless stream of bullets was cutting through them like a saw through a tree.

Jonno's mana was depleting at an absurd rate. Before that moment, Jason didn't realise someone could blow through mana so fast he could pick it up with his magical senses. From the look of Jonno, it was doing a similar job with his stamina.

Jason grabbed a silver-rank recovery potion he had taken from the archbishop of Purity and held it up to Jonno's mouth.

"Drink," he ordered.

Even the over-ranked potion bought Jonno only seconds more uptime with his crazy gun, but seconds were critical as the trolls finally collapsed under the barrage. Jonno's gun vanished and he collapsed right after, Jason helping him stay upright. As Jason pulled a camp chair from his inventory for Jonno to rest, the remainder of the team swarmed the trolls, pouring flasks of liquid over them that started combusting shortly after exposure to air.

"You have to torch them," Nigel explained as they watched the trolls burn. "Otherwise you can kill them and they'll still heal up."

"D&D rules," Jason said. "Burn the trolls."

Jason recognised that Jonno's huge gun filled the same role as Farrah's lava cannon: a showstopping power that devoured mana like pigs with a fresh corpse.

"We need to make sure the bodies are properly burned up or they won't stay dead," Nigel reiterated. "Jungle trolls are one of the physically weakest varieties but their recovery strength is incredible. Fire, fortunately, shuts down the regeneration of just about anything you can get to burn. This bronze-rank everburn oil can be made fairly cheaply, so we all carry it for regenerators."

Jason suspected that the alchemists of Earth were on the same path as Jory of making the most of lesser ingredients. His magic senses were sharp enough to differentiate Jory's bargain potions from the good stuff and he got a similar feeling from most of the alchemical items he had seen in the Network's possession.

"Are you alright, Jonno?" Jason asked. "You look like you've run a marathon."

"I'll be right," he said. "Thanks for that potion."

"No worries," Jason said. "Don't go taking another one any time soon, though. That was a category three recovery potion."

"Yeah, I can feel it," Jonno said. "Good thing mana recovers so much faster here."

"You should see Mr Asano's houseboat," Nigel said. "It has the same mana recovery effect."

“Seriously?” Jonno asked. “How do I get one of those?”

“Go to an alternate reality and then enter a contest to go to a pocket dimension where you compete against the most skilled young essence users in the world to pass a series of trials laid down centuries earlier by an ancient order of assassins that worship the lord of the afterlife,” Jason said.

“No one’s selling them online?” Jonno asked.

“I haven’t checked,” Jason said with a laugh. “Maybe one of those companies that makes custom super yachts can help you out. In the meantime, wait until that potion is out of your system and then eat this.”

Jason handed over a bronze spirit coin, which Jonno held up to examine.

“Is that you?” he asked.

“Yep,” Jason said. Jonno turned the coin over and read the text embossed onto the back.

PRODUCT OF JASON.

G'DAY MATE.

“You are a weird bloke,” Jonno told Jason. “And that’s coming from a guy who just killed a bunch of trolls with his magic airplane gun.”

Nigel checked in on Green, who was the team signaller. As the signaller, it was Green’s job to pay attention to the ADE tracking, even when hunting it wasn’t their job. He did so with a computer tablet that seemed to merge magic and technology, something Jason was fascinated to explore later.

“Those category threes weren’t one of the ADE groups were they?” Nigel asked.

“No, Boss.” Green said. “All three ADE signals are well clear of us. These were definitely ordinary roamers.”

Nigel bowed his head unhappily.

“Problem?” Jason asked.

“Only the ADE should be at the category cap for the incursion space,” Digit explained. “We’re seeing more and more roamers breaking that rule, though. Word is that it’s a sign that we’re going to start see category four incursions. They had one in the UK a couple of years ago.”

“That kind of speculation is above our pay grade,” Nigel said firmly.

“All due respect, boss,” Cobbo said, “but since we’re the ones standing at the front, we’re the first people who get to speculate. If that’s above our pay grade then they’re free to pay us more.”

The rest of the section, on the lookout for more monsters, nodded.

“We have more immediate concerns,” Nigel said, opening up the voice channel to Koen. “Koen, we just ran into some category three jungle troll roamers. The ADE will probably be something with more grunt.”

After reporting in, the section was back on the move.

“Those category three monsters mean that the anchor monsters will be stronger?” Jason asked.

“That’s been the experience so far,” Nigel said. “We won’t be dealing with category fours, but it’ll be from the more dangerous end of category three. It might not be so bad individually, seeing as there’s more than one ADE, but the rules went out the window once a category three roamer showed up. Mr Asano, I’d advise you let us escort you back to the camp.”

“I’d rather stay,” Jason said. “It sounds like you might have need of me.”

Nigel let out a reluctant sigh.

“Mr Asano, I don’t doubt you’re a capable combatant. I’ve seen the footage of you fighting the category three from France. But I have orders and you don’t have the coordination with our units. I don’t doubt you can tear up some monsters, but I am not going to lose people because you wandered into their field of fire and they held back.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said. “I’ll stay out of the fray, but I’m not going back to camp.”

While the silver-ranker led teams continued to track the anchor monsters, Nigel’s section became more aggressive in their sweep of the extended perimeter, bringing their patrol range closer the camp. If a category three reached the camp, iron-rank bullets were not going to stop it. There were bronze-rankers amongst the Network’s harvest teams who were trained enough that they could step up if needed, but probably not without casualties.

Given the situation, Koen had ordered the harvest teams back to camp

“Nigel,” Jason said. “There’s another category three 900 metres in that direction,” he said, pointing. “It looks like it’s approaching one of the harvest teams as they’re pulling back.”

“And how do you know that?” Nigel asked.

“It’s possible I have some friends looking around,” Jason said innocently.

Nigel frowned but ignored Jason’s behaviour for the moment to keep focused on the priority concern of keeping the harvest teams safe.

“How reliable is your information?”

“100%” Jason said.

“Alright. Section, move out, double time. Don’t think we won’t be having a conversation about this later, Mr Asano.”

As the team moved rapidly through the jungle, they saw a distress flare rise up into the sky.

“Looks like the DE found them,” Nigel said, glancing at Jason to find that he wasn’t there. “Bloody hell, Asano.”

“Sorry,” Jason said over party chat. “I thought it was more important to move fast and I didn’t think asking you would facilitate that.”

The team came across a clearing where a toad the size and shape of a Volkswagen Beetle was belching out poison gas. It was adding to an already huge cloud of sickly green that filled the clearing and was now spreading further into the jungle.

Although it was silver-rank, it was far less dangerous than even an individual troll, at least to the team. The monster’s only true threat was its breath, which failed to penetrate a shimmering screen manifested by Higgy. Orange again stripped the rank-disparity damage reduction and an onslaught of special attacks made relatively short work of it. Just as they were wondering how to find Asano and the harvest team in the lingering miasma, a big black ute came rolling out of the greenish cloud. It had no driver but stricken harvest team members were piled into the tray with Jason standing over them, holding out his hands.

“Feed me your sins.”

With the incantation, the red glow of life force emerged from a member of the harvest team, tainted with green murk. The stain was extracted, rising up to be absorbed into Jason’s waiting hand.

While that was still being completed, Jason chanted the incantation again and a second person started to be cleaned alongside the first. Then a shadow hand emerged from Jason's torso for a third simultaneous cleanse, followed by a another. As the fourth began, the first finished and Jason moved on to another harvest team member with his first hand.

With four going at once, the nine-person harvest team was cleansed of the silver-rank poison before it was able to finish them off. Many of them were a lot worse for wear, however, only being iron-rank. If Jason hadn't prioritised their cleansing over the bronze-rankers, then it would not have gone as well.

Jason hopped down off the ute as it pulled to a stop in front of the team. As several of the team started checking on the poison victims and feeding them potions, Nigel marched up to Jason.

"Mr Asano, I thought we had an understanding. Is this what you call observing?"

"I observed that these people were going to die," Jason said. "Having this conversation before instead of after would have those people as corpses right now."

"Better to ask forgiveness than permission?" Nigel said. "We have standing operating procedures for a reason, Mr Asano. A silver-rank monster isn't something you cavalierly take on."

"No, Nigel, it's something *you* don't cavalierly take on. If I couldn't take on monsters like that alone, I'd have died a dozen times over. Look, I'll admit that I wasn't expect much from your Network teams and you've really turned me around. Your tactics are perfect for sweeping through monster infestations this thick."

Nigel opened his mouth to speak but Jason fired off a harmless but startling burst of aura to silence him.

"While I have been impressed with your methods, I've already seen the problem and you should know what I'm about to say. Your teams are great at mopping up the trash, but this strategy won't hold up against the really powerful stuff. If a monster is tough enough to withstand your hammer-blow tactics – and it's a big hammer, I'll grant you – then you're going to get hit back. Hard. Am I wrong?"

"We've taken out four category threes just today," Nigel said.

“I saw,” Jason said. “And I saw what it took to get there. You’re going to need people who can take on trolls solo, even at category two.”

“You’re saying you could have taken one of those trolls by yourself?” Nigel challenged.

“I could have taken all three by myself,” Jason said. “That’s not bragging; it’s just the kind of level you get to when you master all of your powers. I’m not saying every bronze-ranker – category two – should be able to take out every category three. I have powers to shut down regenerating creatures, but throw me up against a silver-rank rock monster and then I only have a chance because I have an arsenal of weapons and tools that the Network just can’t compete with.”

“We can’t match up to your gear,” Nigel said. “But we have training, discipline.”

“You were at that meeting on my houseboat,” Jason said. “Your existing methods are reaching their limits as the monsters keep growing stronger. What happens when the category three monsters aren’t on the weaker end of the spectrum?”

“We adapt our tactics,” Nigel said.

“Look, the Network has kept a lid on all this for centuries, which is incredibly impressive,” Jason acknowledged. “I thought I’d need to rebuild your whole tactical division from the ground up,” Jason said. “That was naïve, dismissive and insulting for which I apologise. Even if I had my team here, we couldn’t mow through monsters with the efficiency that yours does. What you need is a supplemental program. A smaller cadre of people who don’t fight like soldiers. Not regular soldiers, anyway.”

“You’re talking about a special forces unit,” Nigel said.

“Sure,” Jason said. “A special forces unit with training and tactics built around hitting fewer but stronger targets. Powerful monsters require adaptable strategies that leverage every advantage from every team member. That’s how adventurers fight and I’ll help you get there because you’re going to need it. Even if the monsters are getting stronger, the solution to your problem isn’t category four personnel. In fact, I’ve heard, that would be a bad idea. The Cabal’s category fours can’t survive on Earth without going into

hibernation because the magic is too low-grade. I have to imagine that essence users would fare just as badly, if not worse.”

“You think that specially trained category threes are a viable alternative?” Nigel asked.

“Yes. Right now, your team can take on a category three at category two. You need a team that can take on a category four at category three, which is a whole different scale.”

“We don’t have whole teams of category threes.”

“We can work on that too,” Jason said. “My big concern was not having enough monsters to go around, but that doesn’t to be an issue.”

Woolzy walked over from where he had been checking on the harvest team.

“Boss, they’re going to pull through but they’re not in much of a state to move. Either we need the healer support team or we move them on Jason’s...”

He looked around and then at Jason.

“Where did that ute go?” Woolzy asked. “That’s pretty short-lived for a conjured vehicle.”