

Chapter 199

Strangeness

As they went from town to town, clearing off huge stacks of adventure notices, not everything went as planned. Henrietta continued breaking the team into inefficient combinations, which was only the start of things going wrong.

Humphrey had been regularly summoning his dragon tooth warriors, both to practise working with them and level the power. Each time he did, he used the summoner's die to alter their form. The die had proven an effective boost, turning his warriors into hulking gorillas, swift hunting cats or even giant, blood-draining spiders.

The way the die worked was to roll it in the summoning circle, which for Humphrey was a simple circle of powdered chalk. This served to activate the power, calling out the summons in their altered form. Three giant fish made of ivory appeared on the ground, wrapped in chain mail and flopping around like fish on a dock.

"What is this?" Humphrey asked.

"Looks like one of the sides on that die is fish," Jason said, giving Humphrey a consoling pat on the back.

"I can't resummon them for six hours."

"Tough luck buddy," Jason said. "I guess you're fighting this monster without them, unless you can find a lake real quick."

Amongst the iron-rank monsters they were clearing out like they were magical exterminators, they came across the occasional additional notice for a bronze-rank monster. This was where the team faced challenges that truly tested their abilities.

Henrietta assigned Neil, Clive and Belinda to hunt down a monster called a sand hulk, a lesser giant that was common in desert areas. Without Sophie, Humphrey or even Jason to obstruct or distract, the team had little in the way of front-line options against the slow but powerful monster.

Belinda's counterfeit combatant power was at the bottom of iron rank, nowhere close to the point that they would risk her attempting to hold it off. That left Neil's summon, the chrysalis golem, which only took one punch each from the monster's huge fists before retreating into its harmless chrysalis state. It could no longer fight in that state, but not even the giant, twice as tall as person was able to damage it. The giant wasted precious moments that the team used to retreat as it pummelled ineffectually at the crystal cocoon.

The team fought a stalling retreat, blasting away at the monster with wands and spells. Clive's familiar, Onslow, proved a relatively effective source of attacks. Any time Clive wasn't casting his own spells, he was continually recharging the tortoise's elemental powers. The only issue was the tortoise was even slower than the giant, so Clive had to periodically return Onslow to the rune in his skin, then move back before pulling the familiar out again.

Belinda's lantern familiar also sent bolts of force in the sand hulk but was much less effective. The disruptive-force attacks were better against magic in incorporeal entities, rather than a solid, physical monster.

They threw power after power at the sand hulk, which largely shrugged it off. It walked right over Clive and Belinda's rune traps. Belinda's lightning tether dealt damage the further the target moved from it, but even at maximum ranged its damage was superficial. Clive's big attack spell, looped and copied by Belinda, was the only thing that inflicted any real damage.

Belinda glanced at Clive, who nodded and she used her pit of the reaper ability. It opened up a dimensional pit, not an actual hole in the ground but an extra-dimensional one that didn't occupy space and was open to normal space at the top. The walls were frictionless and anything inside would suffer ongoing necrotic damage.

The team's concern was that they had looked up the sand hulk and knew it could transform into a cloud of sand. There was little information about the sand cloud form and Clive was wary of it. They didn't know if it could fly or use some kind of scouring sandstorm attack they couldn't defend against. They had held off using the pit as they were concerned about it triggering the power but they needed all the time they could get to burn the monster down. If it couldn't escape the hole and they could shoot down at it like fish in a barrel, then all the better.

The sluggish monster was not hard to drop into the pit, but their first concern was proven valid as it flew right back out in the form of a sand dervish. It moved no faster than the monster's previous pace, however, and retook the form of a giant.

In the time the pit had delayed it, Neil's golem had the chance to catch up. It had hatched from its cocoon some time ago, but was not much faster than the giant. The golem's new form was something between crystalline and gelatinous. It wrapped a pair of long, rubbery appendages around the monster, which immediately began to retaliate.

The monster ripped off the gooey appendages but the golem simply grew more from its fluid body mass. The monster pounded on the golem's body, which rippled like a jellied dessert as it absorbed the impact. The monster tried transforming into sand to escape the

grip, only to find that as its body started changing into sand, that sand became stuck to the golem. The monster halted the transformation and went back to trying to free itself through main force.

With the giant at a standstill, the team intensified their attacks, throwing everything they had at it. Neil's summon had performed its function of adapting to the needs of the fight admirably, but it was ultimately an iron-rank monster fighting a bronze-rank one. It couldn't harm the sand hulk, merely tie it up for a brief but valuable few moments. Eventually the sand hulk tore its way free by ripping the golem into globulous chunks and tossing them aside. Once the golem fell inert, the giant turned back to the team.

Despite its incredible resilience, the monster was in a bad state, by this point. The sheer accumulation of damage had left it pitted and burned, spilling out sand like it was blood. Neil and Clive had both taken the chance to use powerful retribution effects on the golem, which had turned the damage from the sand hulk's own powerful blows back on itself. Clive's spell had continued to have a large impact and the simple accumulation of damage from rune traps, wands, Onslow's elemental attacks and other abilities had simply piled up.

When it was clear the monster would break free of the golem, Belinda and Clive had set up a whole line of rune traps and the monster waded over them, one after another. This was enough to finally make the sand hulk decide to flee, which it tried to do in the form of a slow-moving sand cloud. Clive used his big attack spell, wrath of the magister, one more time. He used the most powerful version, a prismatic beam launching into the cloud. The colours dimmed, one by one, until the beam was black and a void sphere appeared in the middle of the cloud. The sand was sucked through as if the void sphere was a hole in the universe, the once seemingly indestructible monster annihilated into nothingness.

The weary group trudged back to the rest of the team. They looked to Henrietta for her assessment, although it was Jason who spoke first.

"I don't think there's anything to loot," he said. "Neil?"

"I was too far away," Neil said. "It wasn't in range of my aura."

"Maybe there are some scraps left behind from where they attacked it along the way," Jason suggested.

"Loot can wait," Henrietta said and gave the tired combatants an assessing look. "I took away the toughest and most mobile members of your team and you still got the job done. This was an acceptable performance. If we get another sand hulk it's yours to fight, Asano."

“Won’t that be an easy one for me?” Jason asked. “A big, slow monster like that?”

“The Magic Society entry doesn’t say if that cloud form clears off afflictions,” Henrietta said. “I’m willing to bet it does. I’m curious as to what you’ll do about that.”

Late in the evening, Jason stepped outside the cloud house. They were out in the desert, in between villages, and it had once again taken the form of a set of flat stone buildings.

Jason concentrated and stairs appeared on the side of one of the buildings. It might look and feel like stone, but still moulded itself as the cloud-stuff it truly was. Jason was becoming more and more adept at controlling it. He walked up the stairs to the roof where, to his surprise, he found Clive’s familiar, Onslow, standing in the middle of the roof.

“How did you get up here?”

Onslow responded only with a slow yawn.

“Keep it casual, don’t reveal all your cards,” Jason said. “I can respect that. Mind if I join you?”

The closest Onslow came to a response was an impassive blink.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

A patch of roof rose up to form a chair of clouds and Jason sat down. He concentrated on bringing his breathing to a halt. Henrietta had been on the mark about needing time to adjust to not breathing and he had been practising of a night, wearing his warmest clothes in the chilly desert night.

Neither moon was in the sky but he had no trouble seeing out over the barren landscape. His midnight eyes power was edging achingly close to becoming his first bronze-rank ability and his vision in the dark was near absolute. Originally, the power had let him see with washed-out colour. Now he could see as clear as day, yet he could also see the darkness almost like a physical substance, oddly transposed over his vision. It should have clashed, yet seemed to him part of a natural whole, even though the result looked something like an alien landscape. It was nothing that his old human eyes could ever perceive.

Midnight eyes had been his very first essence ability. Compared to the other things he could do it was positively mundane, yet it was also the most emblematic of everything he had been through. Because of that power, the way he looked at the world had literally changed. It was the still moments, alone in the dark, when Jason most felt the strangeness of his new world. More than that, the strangeness of what he had become living in it.

He practised speaking without breathing, using exercises Henrietta had taught him. Onslow was watching him and Jason retrieved Colin, who piled up in front of the tortoise. Onslow tilted his head to look at the pile as Team Colin undulated excitedly in front of it.

Eventually Jason tired of practise and decided to get some rest, collecting Colin and making his way back down the stairs. There, he had an odd encounter as two people emerged at the same time from different buildings. They were both also Jason.

The three Jason's looked at each other. One had an embarrassed look on his face, the other, a bushy moustache.

"I take it Clive is still trying to have you replicate my interface ability?"

"Yeah," Belinda/Jason said with an apologetic smile.

"Biscuits!"

Jason tousled Stash/Jason's hair. "What did Humphrey say about sweet things before bed?"

"Warm milk?" Stash/Jason ventured.

"That, I think we can manage," Jason said.

"Yay!" Stash/Jason cheered. "Why is everyone better looking than me?"

"That's enough out of you, dragon."