

Chapter 679

Humphrey's New Normal

Clive looked over at the breach in between blasting at monsters with his staff and wand.

"They must have summoners stationed outside, sending more in as we kill these ones."

"I'd say a lot of summoners," Belinda agreed. "I know their summoners can call up more than even Humphrey, but these numbers are beyond anything they told us to expect. Which means we could really use *someone* diving in there to help me use my power effectively."

"Yes, I'm going," Humphrey grumbled through voice chat.

"Have you got the discs?" she asked him.

"Yes, I still have the discs."

"Did you pack a lunch?"

Humphrey's sword claimed the last head of a monster that looked like conjoined tripled carved out of marble, with three wings at equidistant points around its body. It didn't look like it could function, let alone fight, but it was more intelligent than most monsters and could use a handful of spells. Humphrey had charged at it through a rain of projectiles, his mana crystals absorbing some and the others blasting his armour with elemental attacks of fire, ice and lightning. Once he got within arm's reach it was a short fight.

"If you're ready, I'm just going to go," Humphrey told Belinda. "You alright with that, Neil?"

"I'm ready," Neil confirmed.

Humphrey plunged into the torrent of monsters spilling in through the breach and dropping like a waterfall towards the ground. He cleared a path as best he could with his fire breath and swept enemies away with his massive dragon-wing sword. Neil's shields snapped into place every time they came off cooldown, but attacks still rained down on Humphrey's dragon armour.

Neil was a skilled adventurer, but in a very different way to Sophie. He had two quick-use shields that were his most commonly deployed abilities. They were short-lived but exceptionally effective when timed correctly. Neil's skill was not demonstrated in martial or acrobatic prowess but in situational awareness, judgement and timing. Knowing when to use an ability and when to hold it for a few seconds later. Reading the fight to predict what

his teammates would face. Understanding exactly what his companions could and could not endure.

Neil's quick-shield abilities both had cooldowns of twenty seconds, with one being more tactical and the other focused entirely on protection. The tactical power, Burst Shield blasted away enemies that attacked the barrier. It could be used to give the recipient respite from attack, room to manoeuvre or the opportunity to make a counter-strike. This shield was useful as Humphrey was swarmed with enemies, but the protective shield was more critical.

Ability: [Absorbing Shield] (Shield)

- Special ability (recovery, retribution, drain).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 20 seconds.

- Current rank: Silver 4 (07%).

- Effect (iron): Create a short-lived shield that negates an incoming attack and generates mana-over-time with a strength that scales with the amount of damage negated. High-damage attacks of gold-rank or higher may not be entirely negated.

- Effect (bronze): Attacks made against the shield drain health and mana from the attacker and bestow it upon the recipient of the shield.

- Effect (silver): The recipient gains [Priority Ward].

- [Priority Ward] (boon, magic, stacking): When [Absorbing Shield] is used on a target with this boon, the cooldown is reduced by one second for each instance of [Priority Ward]. Additional instances of this boon may be accumulated.

Absorbing shield not only protected but even had some healing and recovery effects. Most importantly, repeated uses meant the short-lived shield could be used on closer and closer intervals. The counterbalance to this was the high mana cost, which could rapidly stack up with sequential uses.

Belinda and Clive's auras both reduced the mana cost of the team's abilities, and Clive's replenished mana at the same time. Even so, Neil was swiftly burning through mana as he cast Absorbing Shield over and over.

"Clive," Neil said as he threw the absorbing shield on Humphrey again. He could barely see Humphrey through the throng of monsters to put the shield up. "Humphrey is taking a pounding out there and I'm going through a lot of mana to keep him up. I'm going to need a tide."

"If I use Mana Tide now, that's it for the fight unless Belinda uses her reset on it."

“If I don’t get some more mana,” Neil told him, “that’s it for Humphrey.”

“Alright,” Clive agreed, pausing from his attacks to cast a spell.

“Let the astral tides bestow their bounty on the chosen.”

Ability: [Mana Tide] (Balance)

- Special ability (recovery).
- Cost: low mana.
- Cooldown: 20 seconds.

- Current rank: Silver 4 (02%).

- Effect (iron): Draw mana from the astral to replenish allies. Mana recovery begins slowly and escalates over time. Local dimensional conditions may impact the rate of recovery.

- Effect (bronze): Allies affected by this ability increase their mana recovery by spending mana. The more mana spent, the greater the recovery increase. Abnormal local dimensional conditions may produce positive or negative side effects.

- Effect (silver): When allies affected by this ability use powers that cost mana, the effect of those abilities is enhanced. Enhanced abilities will be affected by environmental factors.

Mana started trickling into the team, over a widespread enough area that even Jason as Rufus were affected. The trickle grew swiftly as the dimensional membrane between the universe and the astral was still thin and patchy following the monster surge.

Neil continued tossing Absorbing Shields on Humphrey, finding that they were lasting longer than they should. Mana Tide caused abilities to be impacted by the environment, such as ice spells being stronger in the cold or fire spells stronger in the desert. To Neil’s delight, the city barrier, throwing off loose energy from where it was breached, seemed to be boosting his shields.

The rest of the teams started opening up with their strongest abilities, so as not to waste the extra mana. Belinda was waiting for her opportunity, which came as Humphrey emerged from amongst the monsters, job done. He crash-landed inside the shell, bloody and bedraggled despite Neil’s best efforts. His rigid dragon-scale armour was shredded, draping off him like rags. It was clear that he had been chum in the water to that many monsters without the elusiveness of Sophie, Rufus or Jason.

What Humphrey had been doing amongst the monsters was deploying small discs, looping through the horde and leaving them behind like breadcrumbs. The palm-sized objects were unremarkable, with barely enough magic to float in place. Humphrey had left

a trail of them behind, and while a handful were destroyed by the monsters, most were ignored. The orders of their summoners to reach the ground and dig through to the bunker were more important than a few small, unthreatening devices.

As Neil healed Humphrey, who was conjuring a fresh set of armour, Belinda's attention was on the discs. She had crafted them personally with cheap and easy magic, looking for something unremarkable and inexpensive as she wouldn't be getting them back.

Very expensive was the looking glass that allowed her to spy on her discs from a moderate distance and, more importantly, allow her to use her abilities on them. It was a simple device, the range was fairly short and only worked on two of her abilities. Even so, the price for devices that would break the line-of-sight limit that most abilities had was always a costly proposition, and in more ways than one. Such items required an intrinsic link to the user, meaning that if someone hostile got a hold of them, they had grasped a dangerous vulnerability.

The looking glass wasn't actually glass but a hoop of moon silver, threaded with sun gold. The image that appeared as she activated it was an illusion it produced of the closest disc. Extending her power through the hoop, Belinda used her Lightning Tether power. A rod rose up from the disc and an arc of electricity jumped to the nearest monster. The arc stayed in place as another arc jumped from that monster to another, repeating in a chain until seven monsters were linked.

The nature of the power was to inflict very little damage close to the rod, little more than a static shock. The further the targets moved from the rod, however, the larger the damage from the lightning arcs linking them together. Further, the arcs would fire off electricity at other nearby enemies. Given that the monsters were hurtling towards the ground at breakneck speed, the damage swiftly became immense. As myriad arcs of electricity crackled and seared through the monsters, from the outside, it looked like a waterfall of lighting.

Such a spectacular display quickly drew attention. The monsters avoided the lightning and the rod to which it was tethered, although they were so tightly packed there was only so far they could go. The messengers did not avoid it, recognising it as a threat. One of them acted to put a stop to the ability, shooting a razor-sharp feather from a safe distance. Weaving through the monsters, the feather struck the lightning rod, which immediately detonated in an explosion of electricity and force. Even having given the rod distance, the radius was large enough that many monsters were severely burned. There

were no immediate fatalities, but some lost the ability to fly, be it through scorched wings or electrical paralysis.

Belinda shifted her looking glass to another disc and called up another rod.

Belinda went through all the discs left by Humphrey that hadn't been taken out by monsters before she got to them. By the time she was done, the team had once again drawn the attention of the messengers. They had been left alone for a time after killing two and driving off a third, but after Belinda's lightning waterfalls, their interest was renewed. Fortunately, they were mostly still focused on the big areas attackers like Zara and some of the local guild teams. The most they did, for the moment, was redirect more of the monsters to attack the team. It was only a tiny fragment of the numbers still continuing down, but it was enough to put the team under real pressure.

Humphrey had fully recovered, while Belinda worked her magic. With a few healing spells, freshly conjured armour and a quick splash of crystal wash, he was once again looking like the imposing team leader. After getting tossed around by the monsters when he went to them, he was looking to even the score now that they were coming to him. He was going to show them what he could really do, force more messengers to show up themselves and then kill them too.

Humphrey flew around on his conjured wings, the mana drain of doing so reduced by one of the many expensive items he possessed. One of the benefits of coming from a wealthy and connected adventuring family was the ability to source the perfect items, making him the best-gearred member of the team. He used his connections to help the others, but nothing could match the efforts Danielle Geller spent on equipping her children.

Humphrey had struggled on first reaching silver rank. At iron and bronze, the power of his attacks was overwhelming, butchering all but the sturdiest of monsters in a few blows. His strongest attacks could wipe out multiple targets at once. Silver rank was the threshold at which the resilience of bodies, especially those of monsters, outstripped even the strongest of attacks. One hit kills became a thing of the past and Humphrey had needed to shirk some bad habits.

It was a lifetime of training, plus his dedication and experience that helped him push past his initial problems and find his new normal at silver rank. He did so by taking the opposite approach to the rest of his team which, as a whole, specialised in fighting the least common and most exotic enemies. Humphrey doubled-down on his role as the team's anchor, bringing a conventional speed and power approach that was a foundation for many of the team's strategies.

Adventuring at silver rank was a different proposition than what came before. Many adventurers in high-magic zones never saw an unsupervised contract before silver-rank. Most monster encounters fell into three categories, being swarms of weaker monsters, packs of balanced monsters, and the most powerful monsters, spawning alone or in pairs.

At lower ranks, the powerful monsters were the most dangerous, with the strongest bronze-rank monsters outstripping many of the weaker silvers. The difference only really mattered to bronze-rank adventurers who had to be wary of the damage reduction and resistance bonuses that came with rank disparity.

At silver-rank, the solitary monsters were no longer the key threat. With even weak monsters being startlingly resilient, the standard shifted away from the once invincible attacks that had cleared out monsters like sweeping a dirty floor. A good team could leverage their numbers to gang up on one or two targets effectively, or use superior strength to clear out weaker monsters, even if they were tougher than before. Although their team makeup was rather unusual, Humphrey and his team were not so bizarre as to escape that dynamic.

The most dangerous monsters then, were those too numerous to gang up on, yet too tough to be handled quickly. This was the dynamic that Humphrey had prepared himself for. He might not slay every monster with a single sweep of his sword anymore, but he still hit harder than most adventurers, and could move around quickly while doing it. With potent, unrelenting attacks, supplemented by a moderate amount of area damage, he was a square peg in a square hole when it came to the most common and dangerous of monsters.

Humphrey was perfectly suited to the level of power displayed by the monsters summoned by the messengers. The messengers used middle-ground monsters exclusively, but had somehow managed them in massive numbers, making it the worst of all worlds. With extra monsters now focused on Onslow's shell as the team's primary platform, Humphrey got busy.