

## Chapter 237

### It's Not About Killing Monsters

They heard the monsters before they saw them. It began with the sound of something moving loudly through the thick jungle, pushing its way roughly through the undergrowth. Humphrey had them turn around and go back the way they came, making for one of the defensible points he had been looking out for as they travelled.

He had picked out a construction that had held up better than most, due to being a solid, flat, stone platform. It was only around chest high, far from enough to stop monsters, but was at least an impediment they could work with. It was also sized fairly well for the team, giving Sophie and Humphrey the chance to move about while staying close to the more vulnerable party members.

Shade returned to his normal form, gently depositing his riders on the ground. The others took a moment to begin calling up their summons and familiars while Stash turned from a riding lizard into a giant marsh hydra. At bronze rank he could take the physical form of bronze-rank monsters but could only use the full magical powers of iron-rank monsters. He could use some minor magical abilities of bronze-rank monsters, but certainly nothing as powerful as the hydra's potent rapid healing. What he did get was the hydra's strength, toughness and multiple, teeth-laden heads.

Jason directed Gordon to stay with the main group as the familiar's direct damage would be more useful to the team than it would for Jason in the fight to come. He was about to leave when Humphrey held him up.

"Jason," Humphrey said. "We're going to lean on you heavily for this, but I know you can do it."

Jason chuckled.

"Humphrey," he said, shaking his head, "you still don't really understand adventuring. It's not about killing monsters."

Jason tugged casually at his new, bronze-rank battle robe.

"It's about how you look while you're killing monsters. And you have to admit..."

Jason's shadow cloak manifested around him.

"...I make this look good."

"Dear gods, you're insufferable," Neil called out from where he was setting up a summoning circle. "Also, good luck and please don't die."

Jason slipped the hood of his magical cloak back, giving Humphrey a rare smile completely devoid of smirk.

“Don’t go getting it into your head that you have to do all the work,” Jason warned him. “Don’t go thinking that you’re the one who has to save everyone, to make the big sacrifice. Remember when I got it into my head to go of and kill all those bandits alone? I was wrong to do that. Be the beneficiary of my mistakes. It’s not just about you. Or me, which I need to be reminded of, from time to time.”

“Happy to help!” Neil called out, still pouring the salt for his summoning circle.

“Thank you, Neil,” Jason said flatly, then turned his attention back to Humphrey.

“Trust the team, Humphrey. Rely on the team. We’re pretty good. Well, Neil’s okay. But the rest of us...”

Jason slipped his hood back up and lightly ran off, vanishing into the jungle. He was stronger when he was free to run rampant, but would remain in contact with the team through the voice chat.

There were ropey vines all over the platform and Clive handed Sophie and Belinda vials they used to rapidly wither the plants and give themselves clear footing. It was a concoction of Jory’s that Clive had acquired a supply of before returning to the jungle-covered city. They didn’t have enough for it to waste on pathfinding through jungle scrub, but to give them some much-needed solid footing in a crucial moment it was perfect.

As the two women cleared off the plants, Clive started drawing out ritual circles. He started with a large one in the centre of the platform, his battle platform ritual that would enhance the wand and staff attacks, as well as any damage spells of the group. Then he moved on to circles attached to the end of his weapons. The glowing lines moved with the weapons as he waved them about.

The advantage of staff and wand weapons was that they were highly mana efficient, compared to combat magic. The disadvantage was that they were also weaker, but Clive’s ritual circles would help remedy that.

The circles he was using would refine the ambient magic of the area and feed it into the weapons, providing additional power without requiring additional mana from Clive’s own pool. The impact this would have on the ambient magic once he started using his weapons meant that any further rituals in the area would be tricky to use for a while, but that was hardly a concern with what was about to happen.

Clive decided to get in before then and try something he had been working on. It wasn’t related to his essence abilities, instead being a work of pure ritual magic. Ritual magic designed for combat some exceptionally rare, and it was something Clive had developed himself.

He started drawing ritual circles in the air, one after another in a line, like a tube. He poured large amount of his own mana into each one, largely depleting his mana pool by the time he was done. It ran from the centre of the battle platform circle directly toward the jungle where the sound of rushing monsters was growing louder by the moment.

Humphrey and Neil, in the meantime, were calling up their summons. Neil's chrysalis golem looked different at bronze rank. It was just as tall but the formerly chunky, ogrish form was now more refined, like a powerfully muscled giant.

For his own summon, Humphrey hesitated before throwing the summoner's die. He ultimately decided to use it, knowing that it could provide a crucial advantage in what would be a punishing battle. Hopefully, even a bad role would be mitigated by the new ability it had gained on reaching bronze rank. At first, Humphrey had thought there was no change to the function of the die, as there was little change to the description.

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Item: [Summoner's Die: Form] (bronze rank [growth], legendary)

*An eldritch tool for altering the nature of summoned creatures (weapon, wand).*

- Requirements: Summoning power.
- Effect: Rolling this die while enacting a bronze-rank or lower summoning power will randomly alter the form the summon takes.
- Can be used in conjunction with [Summoner's Die: Element] and [Summoner's Die: power]. Using more than one die of the same kind will negate the effects of all dice.

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What he had only later realised was that three of the faces on the die had changed. It had only been the day before when he used the die and one of the new faces rolled up. After stopping, the symbol that lit up was not that of an animal, but one that Clive quickly translated as meaning 'power.' The die had then rolled again, on its own, landing on the symbol for wolf. The result had been Humphrey's summons turning into werewolf like creatures, larger, more powerful and standing on two legs. They were still made of dragon bone and had the conjured equipment generated by Humphrey's storage power, in this case, bronze-rank armour perfectly tailored to fit their unusual body shape.

Humphrey hoped for a similar result as he rolled again. When it stopped, a glowing symbol rose up from the die; another of the new symbols. Humphrey had gone over them with Clive after finding out about the new sides and knew this one meant double. He had been hoping that meant it doubled the number of summons it called up. Even unenhanced by the die, ten of his bone soldiers would be of critical value against the numbers they were expecting.

After falling to a stop, the die rolled itself again, the symbol for bird rising up to float next to the one for double. Then the die rolled for a third time, stopping on cat. The three symbols merged to form a new symbol, one that Humphrey didn't know. Then his summons began to appear.

There were five, the normal number for his summoning power at bronze rank. They had the hind legs and body of oversized lions, and the wings and head of a giant eagle. Their front legs were also those of an eagle, ending in powerful talons.

"Griffins," Humphrey said in a half-whisper. He had seen them as a child, while travelling with his mother. Sailing on a ship near the coast, they had spotted the griffins come soaring majestically off the top of a cliff. They had swooped down, snatching sharks right out of the water before winging away with them.

It had been young Humphrey's first encounter with a magical beast that was natural, rather than a monster. Such creatures were rare in the low-magic Greenstone region where he was born and raised. It had left griffins with a special place in his heart and he was entranced as his summons took their form. These were all white, the colour of dragon bone, and wearing armoured barding suited to their forms.

"Humphrey," Sophie called out. "Eyes up."

Humphrey stirred from his unexpected, nostalgic reverie and realised that the sounds of the approaching monsters had grown from a few individuals crashing through the jungle into what sounded like a wave. Like water crashing onto a rocky shore, the violent sounds of monsters tearing through the undergrowth came washing over them.

Humphrey touched one of the griffins.

"Swoop, grab and drop," he instructed them and they took to the air. He then leapt lightly onto the platform, where Neil and his golem had already clambered up. Most of the team were gathered with their familiars and summons, the exception being Humphrey and Jason. Jason had taken Colin and Shade with him, leaving Gordon behind. Humphrey was present, but his griffon's were winging overhead as Clive's floating tortoise watched their majestic swooping forlornly.

Humphrey had sent Stash, in his domineering hydra form, back behind the platform. The monsters would largely try and swarm them from the front, which is where their main defensive strength was positioned. It was inevitable, though, that the platform would become surrounded. Stash would be their main line of defence from that approach.

Clive and Neil both started casting spells on their teammates. Humphrey grew half his height again from Neil's first offering.

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### Ability: [Giant's Might] (Growth)

- Spell (boon).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 10 minutes.
  
- Current rank: Bronze 0 (04%).
  
- Effect (iron): Target ally and their equipment grow larger, gaining an enhanced [Power] attribute.
  
- Effect (bronze): Ally also gains resistance to physical damage and high-momentum effects.

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Clive's first spell affected the whole team on the platform, including their summons and familiars. Jason, Shade, Colin and the Griffons who were out of range were not so blessed. The ability created rings of glowing runes that floated around everyone.

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### Ability: [Rune Mantle] (Rune)

- Spell (boon, this ability has variable subtypes, contingent on effect).
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: 10 seconds.
  
- Current rank: Bronze 0 (02%).
  
- Effect (iron): Bestow a ring of random runes around an ally. Each rune is associated with a specific effect that affects the ally or an enemy. Attacks against the ally trigger the destruction of a random rune, causing its effect to occur.
  
- Effect (bronze): Increasing the cost to moderate mana allows the rune mantle to be bestowed on all nearby allies.

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Clive's second spell likewise affected the whole team, making them glow gold-red for a moment before fading.

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### Ability: [Mantle of Retribution] (Karmic)

- Spell (boon, retributive).
  - Cost: Low mana.
  - Cooldown: 10 seconds.
  
  - Current rank: Bronze 0 (01%).
  
  - Effect (iron): Inflicts retributive impact damage on anyone who attacks the target ally.
  
  - Effect (bronze): Increasing the cost to moderate mana allows the mantle of retribution to be bestowed on all nearby allies.
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While the spells were being cast, the monsters grew louder and louder, yet there were no roars or shrieks. They were silent, save for the commotion of their passage through the jungle as they flattened everything in their path.

Finally they appeared in front of the team, erupting out of the jungle. As unnerving as the fact that they weren't issuing any noises was the way the disparate group moved as one. Normally, such a wild collection of monsters would be more eager to fight each other than they would adventurers..

As the creatures reached the platform, they finally started to make noise, all in harmony. It was an alien, sonorous cry, filled with hunger.

"Throw your heaviest attacks to blunt the first wave, then conserve mana," Humphrey called out, as if the team hadn't gone over and over the plans for the battle.

Clive had already made his big mana expenditure on his row of ritual circles. They were lined up like the barrel of a gun and he fired a bolt from his staff through the first. The bolt froze, as if caught in an invisible hand, and the mana Clive had put into the circle was fed into the bolt until the circle collapsed. The bolt shot forward again, stopping and draining mana from each circle until it was a huge globe of force that made the air around the team vibrate.

While the bolt was going through its stop-start passage, the rest of the team opened up. Belinda used her force tether power to gather a large cluster of the shoulder-to-shoulder monsters and then open her reaper pit power underneath. The tether exploded and the rest of their health would be eaten away by the pit. Only a few of the tough bronze-rankers would eventually escape when the pit's duration came to an end.

Clive's bolt finished its passage, having consumed all the ritual circles. It landed amongst the monsters like military ordinance, throwing up a huge cloud of dirt and dust,

along with a low boom that rammed into their eardrums. The cloud obscured most of the monsters from their sight, while gobbets of wet jungle earth and wet former monster rained down on the team. They didn't have time to pay it any mind, as what they could see of the monsters showed that they hadn't slowed down.

"What the hell was that?" Jason asked through voice chat.

"Sorry," Clive said. "I didn't realise the effect would be that big."

"Just watch where you're aiming that thing!"