

Chapter 654

Grisly Chore

While Humphrey was only adequate as a personal participant in the battle against the parasitised elves, his contribution was still large. This came through the other assets he brought to the combat, starting with his cohort of summons.

Humphrey's dragon-bone soldiers, the spartoi, had been modified by his powerful, if unpredictable, summoner's dice. In this case, the soldiers had been called up in the form of spiders with fire powers. It wasn't ideal for fighting their current enemy, but randomness was the price of such a potent item. At least they had managed to slog through the fields, unlike Neil's golem. That had been left behind after it half sunk into a rice paddy.

Humphrey directed the soldiers to form a cordon, intercepting the elves approaching from all sides. Only twenty summons was not enough to block them all, but they at least helped prevent the team from being overrun. Unfortunately, Humphrey had to command them to stop spitting burning webs over the elves.

The flames his summons could create because they were affected by a magic item were too removed to count as Humphrey's own fire. As such, Humphrey's aura did not transmute it into dragon fire, and the heat-hungry worms absorbed it. The affected elves had their flesh burned, but being dead were unaffected unless they were low rank enough that it burned them away entirely.

Like other forms of conversion they had seen, becoming a corpse-host for worms seemed to rank up the body. Most of the elves being slaughtered were ordinary people ranked up to iron. Their main threat came from the worms that shot out when the bodies were cut apart. While the higher-ranked ones were burned by the flames of Humphrey's summons, though, the worms inside didn't care. They devoured the heat, which gave their scorched hosts a burst of strength and speed. After witnessing that only a couple of times, Humphrey ordered his spartoi to stop using fire.

Although the summons had the numbers, the most powerful member of Humphrey's cohort was naturally Stash. The mirage dragon had taken on the form of a monster called a spriklish, which was essentially a massive sea urchin atop three giraffe legs. Its main body was the size of an economy hatchback, and it attacked by shooting spines that weren't especially dangerous, at least to an appropriate-rank adventurer. It also had many weaknesses. The long legs were slow and thin, making it easy to topple the creature. Even better, leaving the body up on its high legs made it easy pickings for ranged powers. It had

the ability to rapidly heal, but not fast enough to overcome the attacks of a ranged adventurer.

What made the spriklish a valuable form was that it could shoot spines very rapidly and with pinpoint accuracy. Against the multitudinous-but-frail worms, it left them pinned to the dirt road by spines. Rapid spine regrowth meant that endurance wasn't a problem either.

Stash proved so effective at eliminating the growing sea of loose worms that Belinda sent her echo spirit familiar to mimic him. A second spriklish appeared, looking like a cheap hologram replica. The spines it fired were magical force rather than physical spines, but they worked just as well.

Clive also had his familiar, Onslow, but was holding him in reserve. He wanted the tortoise fully charged up so that he could cover for Clive once he joined Jason. There was one more support, though, who arrived late to the combat.

Neil's chrysalis golem was slow and lumbering. Too slow to keep up with the team as they crossed the rice fields, it had last been seen sinking into a paddy, abandoned to the tender mercies of the parasitised elves. It at least had distracted some of the elves who had gone from farming to frenzy, chasing after the team as they made their way to the town.

The golem's singular power was to shroud itself inside a chrysalis that was near-indestructible, at least to attackers of its own rank. It underwent a transfiguration inside before emerging in a new form, adapted to the battle at hand. Going through the process was not swift, and the golem was ill-suited for short battles. More often than not, they would be over before the summon had undergone its transformation.

As was normal for a power with so many disadvantages, it was formidable should the right circumstances appear. At silver rank, the golem was far better at adapting to enemies and environments, compared to the crude attack reactions that had shaped its lower-rank transformations. When the transformed golem finally appeared over the battlefield, its crystal body was glimmering brightly in the sun.

The golem's new form was a giant, crystalline wasp, the size of a bread van. It had sixteen long, multi-jointed arms, each ending in a hand of narrow, barbed fingers. The wasp came buzzing over the trees and hovered over the battle briefly before descending into the fray.

Wholly unlike its ungainly initial form, the giant insect darted around like a dragonfly, wings buzzing as they flapped in a rapid blur. Its hands reached out and plunged into one

elf after another, jabbing in and out. Each time a hand emerged, dead worms dangled from the barbs on its fingers.

Neil's transfigured golem marked a turning point in the fight. Having configured itself to annihilate hosts and pluck out the parasites within, it alleviated the pressure on the team. They still had to fight and be careful about it, but they were less worried about running into desperate moments.

There were still more and more elves emerging from across the town, however. With a population of several thousand, there was no shortage of bodies. The team even had to move, having no interest in using the piled up dead as a bulwark. They crossed a field of corpses to an empty stretch of wide road and then proceeded to create a fresh charnel house of elven bodies.

The team were all aware that the elven corpses they were laying out were not monsters but victims. They were adventurers, used to laughing in the face of death, but only Rufus had witnessed such a scene before. He had met Gary and Farrah in a town of around the same size, where the population had also been turned into walking corpses.

With the push of the enemy lessened by the arrival of Neil's devastating golem, the fight had lulls that were not entirely welcome. The team bantered as if they were not surrounded by death, trying to keep their mind off the horror they were participating in. The townsfolk had been dead before the team arrived, but they were still aware that they were cutting down mothers and brothers. They all turned their eyes from the reality of how many of the bodies belonged to children.

"Whoever did this is going to burn," Sophie growled.

Not even Humphrey disagreed with Sophie's sentiment of revenge, but the moment was soon over as more elves ran to the slaughter.

"It feels like they'll never stop coming," Neil grimly opined.

"They will," Humphrey said, but he was unable to muster anything but weariness to his tone.

The fight turned from a dangerous battle to a grisly chore as the team eliminated one parasite host after another. Jason's butterflies still flew around, but many worms still crawled away. If they ended up needing to hunt them all, it would be a tedious task.

The worm hosts had apparently turned mindless when triggered, despite having been able to mimic the townsfolk at least enough to lure visitors to their doom. It led the team into a false sense of security, and the most dangerous moment of the battle came as they thought it was reaching a clean-up stage. Whatever intelligence drove the worms held

back a large number of hosts, sending out just enough to keep the team active. Then they rushed in to swamp the team with pure numerical advantage.

Despite being surprised, the team reacted with professionalism, their readiness never having truly slacked off. Rather than push back hard, Humphrey instructed the team and his bone spiders to stop warding off elves and let them cluster up. Sophie even helped, rounding them up with her Wind Wave power. Once they were nice and collected, it was Neil's turn to step in.

Of everyone in the team, it was Neil who had the hardest time ranking up. More than any other member, his power set had abilities that were high-cooldown, circumstantial or both, making them hard to use on a regular basis. Even his summon was hard to raise up, with battles often ending before the summon could enter its chrysalis, let alone exit. As for his healing and support powers, the excellence of his team actually hurt him. In more fights than not, there was little call for Neil's abilities.

Neil was best served in critical fights, but constantly chasing the edge would get the team killed, sooner or later. The rest of the team had a variety of attack powers they could use. The biggest problems were Humphrey, Belinda, Clive and Rufus, all of whom advanced an extra step faster because they were human.

At low ranks, the human advantage in ability growth speed mattered little, but now they were at the wall. When ranking up abilities took exponentially longer, even a minor advantage would add up over time.

Like many healers, Neil used a lot of his downtime to raise his healing powers slowly but reliably on civilians. It was also fulfilling to help people in need, reminding Neil why he'd joined the Church of the Healer in the first place.

Even so, many of Neil's powers could only be deployed in action. Without the team falling into dire straits, many of Neil's powers went unused. From his overwhelming single-target buff to wide-area heals and cleanses, all of Neil's big spells had an impact, but only when the circumstances were right. Even though such abilities inherently rose more quickly than others, it still made them awkward to use.

Ability: [Reaper's Redoubt] (Shield)

- Special ability (dimension, disease, unholy).
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: 6 hours.

- Current rank: Silver 3 (98%).

- Effect (iron): Take allies into a dimensional space briefly while flooding the area with death energy, dealing disruptive-force damage, necrotic damage and inflicting [Creeping Death] on everything in the area.
 - Effect: (bronze): Allies undergo extreme mana replenishment while in the dimensional space.
 - Effect: (silver): Enemies are afflicted with [Death's Grip]
 - [Creeping Death] (damage-over-time, disease, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until the disease is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 - [Death's Grip] (unholy): The effects of healing are reduced. This effect is initially weak but is enhanced by any necrotic damage suffered by the victim.
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As a healer, Neil had little in the way of destructive power, but the one ability he did have was devastating. Although more and more elves continued to rush at them, his power provided the team with a reset. When they emerged from the dimensional space Neil created, the worms and their elven hosts in a wide area were rotted and dead. The same was true of plants, trees and even the wooden buildings, the closest ones having collapsed.

“Did I just sense our healer blanketing the area in death and murdering everyone and everything?” Jason asked through voice chat. It was light and jovial, as if they weren’t surrounded by death, even though he mentioned it specifically. They each knew from Farrah that Jason had once encountered what they’d all gone through on a much wider scale. They realised he wasn’t being flippant over death but telling them to do what they could to put it out of their minds until the job was done.

“I had to do it,” Neil said. “Someone ran off by himself and left us to do all the fighting.”

“Hey, I have an important role,” Jason said defensively. “On an unrelated note, chewing sounds don’t come through my voice chat, right?”

“Not the time,” Humphrey scolded. Unable to put all the deaths aside, even for the moment, his face was filled with rage and nowhere to put it. He could kill townsfolk victims and massacre worms all day, but it wouldn't give him the person behind it all. The hope was that Jason found them, although that wasn't why he reached out.

“I just talked with Carlos,” Jason reported. “I updated him on what we’ve seen.”

“And?” Humphrey asked.

“He said that world-taker worms are bad.”

“Oh, they’re bad,” Neil said. “I’m glad we figured that out. Extremely helpful.”

“More helpful than sarcasm,” Belinda muttered.