

Chapter 653

The Old Groove

The team only had a brief respite from the worm-host elves that were inundating them, rushing from every street and building in the town to hunt them down. While Humphrey and Jason quickly discussed Jason's departure, Clive drew out a ritual circle. Golden lines were left behind by the edge of his staff as he used it to draw, like scratching in the sand with a driftwood stick. The ritual, like the golden light itself, was an aspect of Clive's most fundamental ability.

Ability: [Enact Ritual] (Rune)

- Special ability.
 - Cost: varies.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Silver 4 (12%).

 - Effect (iron): Manifest lines of magic to draw out ritual diagrams. Materials required for a ritual may be used directly from a dimensional storage space instead of being placed within the diagram.

 - Effect (bronze): Create simple ritual diagrams to alter the parameters of magical items.

 - Effect (silver): Conjure mana lamps with enhanced efficiency and accumulation rate. Refined mana from the lamp can be used to enhance ritual magic.
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The ritual was designed for Clive and Belinda to stand on, altering the parameters of their magical weapons. Belinda was using her Specious Sorcerer ability to take on a spellcaster role, avoiding getting too close to their enemies.

Ability: [Specious Sorcerer] (Charlatan)

- Special ability.
- Cost: Very high mana.
- Cooldown: 6 hours.

- Current rank: Silver 4 (09%).

- Effect (iron): Gain a significant increase to the [Spirit] attribute and the ability to use magical tools. Your maximum mana increases and you gain an ongoing mana recovery effect.

- **Effect (bronze):** Gain the ability to cast a number of basic spells.
 - **Effect (silver):** Gain the ability to cast additional spells, based on the gear you have equipped.
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With a robe, plus a wand in one hand and a staff in the other, she was equipped much like Clive. She had supplied herself with decent-quality items, albeit not the equal of the weapons and armour Gary had crafted to use with her Counterfeit Combatant power. They certainly weren't a match for Clive's staff and wand, which were a legendary growth item set he had picked up at iron rank, before Belinda had even joined the team.

Both Belinda and Clive's weapons would be affected by Clive's ritual. Instead of the normal bolts and beams of force for Clive, and fire for Belinda, their staves and wands would produce cold attacks. They didn't know much about the parasites infesting the townsfolk, but they seemed to feed on heat. That made cold Clive's best guess as to what would be the most harmful to them.

Clive finished his preparations by using another ability to attach ritual circles to their weapons directly, the floating magic diagrams, somewhat akin to Jason's system windows. Not wasting time, Clive and Belinda were already on the attack by the time Jason vanished into the shadows, blasting the onrushing elves with bolts and beams of magic.

The team set up so that Sophie, Rufus and Humphrey moved in a circle to shield Neil, Clive and Belinda from attacks on each side. Stash and Belinda's familiars were inside the circle as well, while Humphrey's dragon-bone spiders roamed out to run interference.

With the numbers they were facing, efficiency in both time and mana was important. In extended fights, especially against so many opponents, they needed to make the most of their big-ticket abilities, and even their mid-range heavy-hitters. The right abilities needed to be ready, with enough mana to use them, when the optimal moments arose.

Managing this for the team had become Belinda's job. Their time apart meant that the team had to learn all-new ways to work together. Not only was their teamwork out of practise but their old bronze-rank strategies were no longer sufficient. They and their power sets had gone through massive changes, and it was taking time to find the old groove.

One of the more defining changes to how they worked together was that Belinda had taken on a tactical director role. While Humphrey generally called the play, it was Belinda who helped the team execute the details. She was always tracking who could do what and when, courtesy of Jason's interface, and the team's efficiency was spiking as a result.

Belinda had fallen into this role for several reasons, starting with her power set. Belinda's powers placed her in a position to facilitate the rest of the team in various ways, and ranking up had only amplified that factor. She could reduce or entirely reset cooldowns, as well as duplicate key abilities.

Even Belinda's magic tattoo could reset some of her cooldowns, being the silver-rank version of the one she had at iron rank. She had been careful to get it after what happened at bronze. After a night drinking with Sophie, she woke up with a magic tattoo that produced hot sauce.

Judgement was key to Belinda's power set, as almost every power she used to assist the team would live or die on the timing. The only exception was her aura.

Ability: [Masterful] (Adept)

- Aura (recovery).
- Base cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Silver 4 (11%).

- Effect (iron): Abilities of allies within the aura come off cooldown more quickly.

- Effect (bronze): Mana and stamina costs for the essence abilities of allies are slightly reduced. Has greater effect on abilities with ongoing costs than instantaneous costs.

- Effect (silver): Boons affecting allies have slightly increased effect.

The reliable but generalised bonuses were nice, but weren't anything that would turn a battle on its head. It was Belinda's active powers that could make for clutch plays, where the trump card of an ally became a handful of trump cards and clinched a win.

Belinda's ability to manage not just her own abilities but those of the team was key, but only the start of why she was now the tactical centre. Every essence user had their mind enhanced by their spirit attribute, but there were differences in how that applied specifically. Clive had always been the smartest guy in the room when it came to deciphering the complexities of sophisticated and exotic magic. Ranking up had only enhanced his ability to comprehend the most sophisticated nuances of magic. Jason's mental advancements were perceptual, allowing him to better process sensory input greater than others of his rank. In Belinda's case, it was a peerless ability to multitask. The return of Jason and his party interface made that trait not just valuable but the centrepiece for her new role on the team.

Jason's party interface was one of the most impactful contributions he brought to the team, now that they were silver rank. It provided so much information that when the whole team was in a party, there was too much visual clutter to even see. From health condition body indicators to mana and stamina bars to cooldowns for every active ability, each team member had to customise the interface to their own needs.

Humphrey, Sophie and Jason himself had the most pared-down interfaces. They all had to move fast and get deep in the action, so minimum obstruction was the goal. Being the healer, Neil maintained a more robust interface so he could monitor the team, but that did not compare to Belinda. She tracked every active cooldown of every team member in real-time, along with the mana they had to use their powers.

It was a mess, but one that gave Belinda an unrivalled tool for enhancing her effectiveness. Only she was able to parse all that data, let alone do so while actively participating in combat. She was the one who saw the gaps and plugged them, either by directing a teammate or by employing her own versatile power set.

Belinda's new authority in the team came with growing pains. Jason's interface gave Belinda the metrics to dig out the team's inefficiencies and zero in on their inefficient habits. It was good in the long run, but no one enjoyed having their shortcomings pointed out.

"Neil, throw out some more spells," she instructed. "Your mana is too close to full. Use Verdant Cage on cooldown to slow down the incoming elves as much as you can. Focus on the fields, where the existing plants will strengthen the power. Then use Reels of Fortune to dump mana; my power is ready to help you with the cooldown so you can triple-cast it."

Ability: [Blessing of Readiness] (Adept)

- Special ability (recovery).
- Base cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: Varies.

- Current rank: Silver 4 (10%).

- Effect (iron): This spell can only affect an ally and not yourself. The cooldown of the next ability used by the target is reduced by up to one minute. The cooldown of this ability is equal to the time taken from the cooldown of the target ability.

- Effect (bronze): The affected ability can have the cooldown reduced by up to ten minutes.

- **Effect (silver):** This spell can be used one additional time while on cooldown. The cooldown incurred by the second use is added to the original, and the spell cannot be used again until the full cooldown is complete.
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Rough edges were no surprise after the team had spent years apart. It was more than Jason's absence, as the rest of the team had drifted apart in the wake of his loss. Neil and Belinda had worked together, protecting Jory as he roamed the world in dangerous times. As for Sophie, Humphrey and Clive, they had pursued their vendetta against the followers of Purity and the Builder. Clive had played third wheel for almost two years as he watched the other two awkwardly circle one another, the ghost of Jason in-between them. Even worse were the regular debriefs on their relationship progress, demanded of Clive by Belinda every time they all met up.

"I thought your job was to make us efficient," Neil complained to Belinda. "Explain to me how having almost full mana is an efficiency problem and not just efficiency."

"Your aura is feeding us way more mana than normal from all these worms dying," she said. "You're letting mana go to waste because you can't hold any more."

Ability: [Spoils of Victory] (Prosperity)

- **Aura (recovery, conjuration, boon, drain).**
 - **Base cost: None.**
 - **Cooldown: None.**

 - **Current rank: Silver 4 (02%).**

 - **Effect (iron):** Effect (Iron): Allies within your aura recover mana and stamina for each enemy that dies within your aura, also receiving a minor healing effect. You can loot enemies that die within your aura.

 - **Effect (bronze):** Your [Spirit] attribute is temporarily increased each time an enemy dies within your aura.

 - **Effect (silver):** Enemies that die within your aura leave behind orbs of health and mana that can be collected by allies to gain healing and recovery effects.
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"Thank you for the orbs, by the way," Humphrey chimed in. As the most mana-hungry member of the team, as well as being highly mobile, finding mana boosts scattered around the battlefield was a massive boost. Neither the healing nor the mana gains were exceptional, but especially with a swarm monster like the worms, they added up.

"Your aura should have maxed out your spirit buff as well," Belinda told Neil. "Only using that power on shields and healing is a waste."

The rest of the team was also giving their all, adventurers and familiars alike. Belinda's astral lantern familiar was firing off its own force bolts, focusing on any worms attempting to sneak up on the team while they were distracted. Worms that had escaped both Sophie's wind blades and Jason's afflictions were already crawling along the ground, seeking out the team in moments of inattention.

Humphrey was the most vulnerable as he was a melee fighter. Sophie and Rufus were as well, but her grace and speed, plus his elegant elusiveness, made them untouchable. They moved like dancers of fast-forward, reminding everyone that no one else on the team could touch them for pure skill.

Humphrey was also highly skilled, but so much of how he fought was about the application of power, which was not useful against enemies that were weak and numerous. It also didn't help that his powerful attacks sent worms spraying out of the elves he cut apart. Without the evasiveness of Sophie and Rufus, he found the worms splashing over him.

To minimise his exposure, Humphrey was modifying his usual combat style. His usual fast-paced aggression was not ideal for defending and his heavy attacks were overkill against the worm-laden elves. He focused more on lateral movement than charge-forward aggression, and on skill rather than overwhelming power. It's not that Humphrey didn't have the skill – his mother would never have stood for it – but it wasn't his strongest area. Key to making his adapted style work was his sword. Of his two conjured weapons, he usually favoured the largest. For his current situation, however, the smaller sword was the right choice.

Ability: [Razor-Wing Sword] (Wing)

- Special ability.
 - Cost: High mana.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Silver 4 (11%).

 - Effect (iron): Conjures a sword in the shape of a wing. Movement powers are enhanced while wielding it. Ineffective when used with special attacks best suited for large or heavy weapons.

 - Effect: (bronze): Feathers from the wing sword can be used as projectiles.

 - Effect: (silver): Feathers from the wing sword can be animated to intercept physical projectiles.
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The Razor-Wing Sword was stylised as an angel wing of white and gold, with glossy metal feathers. It could fire razor feathers from the blade, which Humphrey was making the most of to pick off loose worms. As of silver rank, it also produced feathers that floated around him to intercept projectiles. As this included worms flinging themselves at him, Humphrey was able to fight in relative safety.

Humphrey was still able to be effective, despite changing up his style, but he was not fighting at full effectiveness. He was forced to be careful instead of bold; passive instead of taking the fight to the enemy. He had to be constantly vigilant, even with his defensive measures. This was especially true when he had to stand his ground between parasitised elves and his team members.

Neil took some of the load in those moments, dropping a characteristically well-timed shield over Humphrey. As for Humphrey, that was when he deployed what was his most useful power, given the circumstances. His Fire Breath power sprayed out like a flamethrower, burning up waves of elves and eliciting shrieks like those Jason's aura had drawn out. It was extremely effective, despite the worms feeding on heat, because it was not ordinary fire.

Ability: [Dragon Might] (Dragon)

- **Aura (recovery).**
- **Base cost: None.**
- **Cooldown: None.**

- **Current rank: Silver 4 (13%).**

- **Effect (iron): Allies have increased [Power] and [Spirit].**

- **Effect (bronze): Fire created by your essence abilities becomes dragon fire.**

- **Effect (silver): Allies have increased resistance to effects that reduce the [Power] and [Spirit] attributes.**

Humphrey's aura turned any fire produced by his abilities into dragon fire, which was significantly more troubling to deal with. It was certainly beyond the power of the parasite worms to feed on.

The biggest problem with Fire Breath, and the reason Humphrey didn't usually rely on it as a mainstay, was that it was extremely mana-hungry. Fortunately, the team had many methods of replenishing mana. Clive's aura and Belinda's astral lantern familiar both did so, as did the crystals floating around Humphrey from his own Crystallise Mana ability. Neil's orbs were a boost, and Humphrey's equipment also leaned heavily into retaining or

replenishing mana. The net result was Humphrey possessed an extraordinary amount of sustain for someone with his power set.

Humphrey's greatest advantage, however, was not his powers, his training or his gear; it was the humility to recognise that he was not the critical figure in this combat. He didn't make any bold rushes or seize any perceived opportunities. He did the work, stayed the course and trusted in his team.