

Chapter 79: Sand Everywhere

Chaos erupted as the sand came to life all around them, surging like waves. From the empty desert, they were suddenly surrounded, the sand rising up to take a variety of crude forms. None were any larger than a person, but there were dozens of them, from crude torsos like half-melted snowmen to sharks swimming through the sand like it was water. The shapes were all poorly formed, without delicate features.

New Quest: [Elemental Ambush]

You have been surrounded by sand elementals. Defeat them before your team is overwhelmed.

- Objective: Defeat [Lesser Sand Elemental] attack.
 - Reward: Quintessence.
-

“Sand elementals!” Jason heard Phoebe shout over the sudden chaos. “Use powerful attacks to completely break up their forms or they’ll just recover!”

Jason released his aura as he felt others wash over him.

- You are in the area of an ally’s [Dragon Might] aura. Your [Power] and [Speed] attributes are increased.
 - You are in the area of an ally’s [Presence of the Master] aura. The effect of your essence abilities is increased.
-

He could easily sense Humphrey and Phoebe through their auras. Gabrielle and one of the other adventurers also projected auras, but they didn’t seem to affect him. Unfortunately, Jason’s own aura was unlikely to have a large impact on the fight.

Ability: [Hegemony] (Sin)

- Aura (holy, unholy)
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

 - Effect (iron): Allies within the aura have increased resistance to afflictions, while enemies within the aura have their resistance to afflictions reduced. Enemy resistances are further reduced for each instance of [Sin] they are afflicted with.
-

He doubted creatures made of sand would be using any afflictions, and his own would certainly not affect them. For that reason, he drew the sword Gary had made for him instead of his dagger. By the time it cleared the scabbard, Humphrey was already in motion beside him.

Dragon scale armour shimmered into existence around Humphrey as an enormous, wing-shaped sword appeared in his hand. He swept it in a wide arc at the three elementals closest to himself and Jason. They exploded as the sword hit them, showering Humphrey and Jason in sand as the sword didn't even slow down.

"You good?" Humphrey asked Jason.

Jason's starlight cloak manifested around him.

"Do your thing, mate."

Humphrey nodded as dragon wings appeared on his back. They launched him into the air, beating to hold him aloft as he surveilled the team. Phoebe was fine, blasting huge chunks off elementals with explosive palm strikes. Gabrielle had conjured a huge iron staff that was twirling around her like she was putting on a show. Any elemental foolish enough to get close was torn apart by its powerful momentum.

Two of the other adventurers were holding their own, back-to-back against the elementals, while the last was alone and already struggling. Humphrey didn't know him before they teamed up, but seeing he was an elf, the man was almost certainly a spell caster. Close combat was likely to be the man's least-favourable circumstance, so Humphrey dived in immediately.

Humphrey's wings pushed up hard, sending him plunging into a dive bomb special attack. Hurling out of the sky, his feet smashed apart an elemental as he passed through it to land, the wings on his back vanishing as his sword lashed out.

The might essence was one of the most common essences to be found, yet also one of the most highly regarded. Even someone as privileged as Humphrey, who had his pick of essences, had chosen to use it. It was a simple essence, with simple abilities. Mighty strength, for example, was exactly what the name suggested. As the most common ability of the most popular common essence, it was the single most common essence ability in the entire world.

No one needed to have explained what made the might essence so popular, but anyone would think Humphrey was going out of his way to demonstrate. He swung his enormous sword with power and precision, as if it weighed almost nothing. Every elemental it touched blew up like a car in an Eighties action movie, showering the area with sand.

After clearing some space, Humphrey spared a glance for the beleaguered elf, who looked at him with gratitude.

“Keep them off me and I can take a bunch of them out,” the elf told him.

“Do what you need to do,” Humphrey said. “I’ve got you.”

In the meantime, Jason was dealing with elementals of his own. He lashed out with his sword, to minimal effect.

-
- Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Lesser Sand Elemental].
 - [Lesser Sand Elemental] is immune to afflictions.
 - [Sin] does not take effect.

 - Affliction immunity has triggered an effect on weapon [Dread Salvation].
 - Weapon [Dread Salvation] has gained an instance of [Stone Cutter].
-

Jason lashed out with quick light strikes, putting a special attack into each one. The blade barely finished making a cut before sand removed any trace, but that was never the goal. Each failed affliction triggered the effect of his sword, which grew more powerful with every strike.

-
- [Stone Cutter] (magic, stacking): All attacks deal additional resonating-force damage. Highly effective against physical defences. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

Every attack started blasting sand off the elementals, but was yet to leave a lasting impact. The sword might not deter the encroaching elementals, but he had an answer for that. He would keep one elemental to build up stacks with his sword; a sluggish, snowman-shaped one, too slow to pose a real threat. At others, he would lash out with kicks, not hitting the creatures, but slicing his foot past them. As he did, a razor-whip of black shards extended from his boot, cutting through the elemental and scattering it to the winds.

“I love these boots.”

Item: [Sand-Cutter Boots] (iron rank, rare)

Boots crafted with the chitin of a sand-cutter, inheriting some of its power. (apparel, boots).

- Effect: Improved ability to walk on sand.
 - Effect: Increased jump height and distance.
 - Effect: Enhanced kick attack. Highly effective against enemies with strong earth affinity.
-

It was taking time to accumulate power onto Jason's sword, but with dozens of elementals still swarming them, he was in no danger of running out. With every attack, the sword's power grew. Sand started blasting off the elementals as it landed, leaving noticeable gouges.

He became more aggressive, lashing out with his sword and his razor-whip boots. The sword kept getting stronger until it was carving a path through the elementals. By the time he fought his way over to Humphrey, Jason's sword had joined his boots in taking down elementals at a single blow.

Humphrey had set about keeping the elementals off the spell caster. By the time Jason reached them, the elf behind Humphrey had gathered a huge sphere of white and fire-orange magic over his head. Looking up at it with a wild grin, he started chanting.

"Fire and air, fuel and feast, come forth and devour, the vortex beast!"

"Hey, that rhymes," Jason said as they watched the orb drift slowly over their heads, drifting toward the largest mass of elementals. Heat and wind washed over them as it passed. Then they heard the elf behind them yell out.

"RUN!"

They turned to see the elf already following his own advice, sprinting away from his own spell at top speed. Jason and Humphrey glanced at one another and did the same. A few seconds later there was a cacophonous explosion behind them as a force wave blasted them off their feet.

Jason pushed himself up from where he sprawled in the sand, head ringing from the noise. All he could hear was a rushing sound, like the ocean. Kneeling in the sand he wavered, unsteadily. Humphrey tapped his arm and pointed forward where the elf had gotten back up and continued running. Jason nodded, and after a dizzy false start followed, picking up his sword from where he'd dropped it.

Jason staggered forward, an equally unsteady Humphrey at his side. They caught up to the elf who had stopped to avoid running into elementals from the other direction. Still unable to hear, Jason felt the air stirring, loose sand fluttering along the ground.

Looking back the way they had come, he saw a burning orb surrounded by a vortex of air, dragging things into it. Closer to the orb, the suction was clearly more powerful, sucking up the sand elementals as they struggled to escape. Those that were caught up passed through the orb, splattering out the back as gobbets of molten sand.

Humphrey tapped Jason on the shoulder again, gesturing the other way. Jason looked to see Phoebe and Gabrielle handling the elementals just fine by themselves. The adventurers fighting back-to-back were doing less well as elementals converging on them.

Jason took a healing potion from his belt, Humphrey doing the same from his own. They each thumbed the stoppers off their vials and draining the contents. Jason head cleared, the rushing noise in his ears replaced with actual sound.

Behind them, they could hear the suction of the vortex. Ahead of them was what sounded like muffled explosions as Phoebe blasted apart elementals with bare-handed special attacks. From Gabrielle's direction was a regular smacking sound as her iron staff burst open more elementals with raw strength.

"Your lady friend is kind of scary," Jason told Humphrey.

"Not the time, Jason," Humphrey said, wings appearing briefly as he used a special attack to leap away. He landed like a grenade near the pair of struggling adventurers, sweeping away elementals.

Jason took a couple of steps and used the leaping power of his boots to follow, arriving in the space Humphrey had just cleared.

"You have to make time for relationships," Jason said, his sword cutting through an elemental. "Time and communication."

The two adventurers they had come to support went from almost overwhelmed to completely unnecessary. Humphrey and Jason each took a side of the pair and moved around them, clearing out elementals like they were trimming a hedge.

Humphrey and Jason had very different fighting styles. Humphrey used strength and the weight of his heavy sword. Solid as a rock, his subtle but crucial footwork the foundation of his balance as he swung a sword heavier than he was. His sweeping strikes looked simple, but their power and precision were exacting.

Jason's style was more like an acrobatic dance. His sword was much smaller, smashing elementals apart not with power but with the considerable magic it had built up over the fight. The blade flickered in his hand, elementals scattering into clouds of sand on

contact. His feet moved just as fast, and not always on the ground. Launching into a spinning leap, his razor-whip boots each took down an elemental before he landed, his movement never stopping.

The vortex bomb was the tipping point of the battle, letting the group get a handle on the elementals' huge numbers. As the last one fell, the group came together, exhausted. They stood around, hands on knees, or lay down, ignoring the heat of the sand. Jason took out a fruit drink, slurping loudly to the envy of the others. Humphrey shook his head as identical paper cups appeared from his own void storage space.

"Gem berries?" Jason asked Humphrey, who nodded as he handed one of the large cups to Gabrielle. She gave him a dazzling smile before happily sipping at the juice drink.

Phoebe looked around the group with a weary grin. Only the elf and the two adventurers who fought together were injured, and nothing more than bruises. Sand elementals weren't very dangerous individually, at least not ones that small. It was their numbers that made them a threat.

"Now you know why we send such big teams when we go out into the dunes," Phoebe told the group.

"That's rough," Jason said unhappily, shifting uncomfortably on the spot. "That's really rough."

"We did warn you that we would be going into the desert," Phoebe told him.

"What?" Jason asked absently, putting away his drink and taking out a bottle of crystal wash.

"Oh, not that," he said, tipping the bottle into his pants. "I meant literally rough. I have sand everywhere."