

Quinn: Hey, folks. Quinn here. Thanks so much for joining us for this very special Chief Stoney bonus episode of Monster Hour. We are releasing this episode as part of our one-year podversary celebration. The earth has completed a whole rotation around the sun since we launched our first episode, which I can confirm is absolutely wild. We never had big expectations for this show and we have been absolutely blown away by how much folks have enjoyed it.

We have listeners in every state, dozens of countries around the world and close to 10,000 downloads on 30 awesome episodes. None of that, none of that would have been possible without all of the ratings, and reviews and recommendations to friends and shoutouts on social media that you all have given. So, from the bottom of all of our hearts, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you so much. We are so appreciative of everything that you do.

As part of our first anniversary celebration, we have two big announcements that I am super excited to share with you all. First, we have a Discord now. We have our own channel set up on the Cast Junky Discord server, which is an awesome community of indie podcasts spanning every genre imaginable. If you're looking for a place to come chat about the show, what happened in the latest episode, your favorite characters, theories, fan art, you name it, with us and with other fans, then definitely be sure to come check it out. There's a link in the show notes that will take you straight there.

Second, we have launched our Patreon, which is super exciting. Now, I know you may be asking yourself, why should I be excited about the opportunity of giving you lovable rascallions money? And the answer, of course, is perks. From better recording equipment to GM and mystery notes, to more bonus episodes and mini campaigns like this one, Patreon will allow us to bring you more and better content. I'll be walking through each of the tiers and perks in our upcoming intermissions. But if your interest has already been peaked, you can go check it out at patreon.com/monsterhour.

One final note on programming. Getting all this lined up has been a bit of an undertaking, and our crew could all use a short break. As such, our next regular episode will be coming out two weeks from today on August 18th. Until then, enjoy the episode and stay spooky.

[Monster Hour theme]

Quinn: Hello, everyone. And welcome to a very special episode of Monster Hour. I am Quinn, your Keeper of Monster and Mysteries. Joining me today is Austin.

Austin: Hey. It's Austin. I'm back again, and I am playing Stoney the Professional.

Quinn: So, this is a special bonus episode of Monster Hour. This is a prologue, a prelude episode to our regular campaign. Austin is reprising his role as Chief Stoney before he became Stoney, a ways back actually. We are going to go ahead and just jump right in.

We open on a vast, sprawling desert stretching as far as the eye can see. The gently rolling dunes are interspersed occasionally by more rugged hills and patches of tough shrub. Overhead, the sun beats down relentlessly, waves of heat rising up along the horizon. In the midst of this emptiness, tucked discreetly in the shadow of a craggy hill, is a tight knot of drab tents and bivouacs. We can just make out a few figures clad in desert camo fatigues patrolling the perimeter, standing watch.

The year is 1991. Our location, a US Army Ranger forward deployment camp during the Gulf War. Ranger specialist, Stoney Lock. You have a little bit of time to kill before the mission briefing. Where do we find you?

Austin: Yeah. So, Stoney, at this time, is, what, like early 20s?

Quinn: Yeah. I'm thinking like--

Austin: Late teens, early 20s?

Quinn: Probably early 20s.

Austin: Okay. Let's see. I think Stoney is this as a young and-- I think if he's an army ranger, I think he has a fair amount of discipline. So, I think he is probably cleaning his rifle right now.

Quinn: So, you're cleaning out all the chambers, you're making sure everything is well oiled and situated. This is a good opportunity. What equipment are you rocking today, Specialist Lock?

Austin: I'm looking at the professional playbook. I think he's got assault rifle as a serious weapon. 3 harm far area, loud reload. So, I think assault rifle, he might have a 9 millimeter as a backup weapon.

Quinn: Makes sense. Sidearm.

Austin: Yeah.

Quinn: So, you're cleaning your rifle. The camp is pretty quiet. It's starting to get towards sundown. I think you are greeted by a call behind you. [as Ace] *Stoneman, what's going on?* You recognize the voice of Sergeant Ace Jackson, who is technically your direct superior, but also your good friend. You joined up at the same time, and he just recently got this promotion, but you're still quite close despite the new hierarchy. He's a large man very well built. He's got the very standard, close, close crew cut. He comes up and takes a seat next to you.

Austin: [as Stoney] *Ace, how you doing, bud?*

Quinn: [as Ace] *You know how it is.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *Yeah, man. I tell you what, it's a hot day today.*

Quinn: [as Ace] *Hmm. Everyday. Making sure that thing's nice and clean for the mission later?*

Austin: [as Stoney] *Yeah. Look, I know it's already clean. I think there's some comfort in it. If I can trust my material, if I know 100% that my tools are working all right, then what do I got to fear?*

Quinn: [as Ace] *I always admire that about you. You're diligent.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *Ah. Thanks. Thanks, Ace. man, I learned it from you, bud.*

Quinn: [as Ace] *[laughs] Oh.* I think he pulls out a carton of cigarettes, and lights one and he offers one to you as well. I don't know if you're-- I don't know if stoney smokes.

Austin: He sure did in 1991.

Quinn: [laughs] Okay.

Austin: [as Stoney] *Yeah, man. Give me one of those. Man, that's the cool one with that cool desert animal, the camp that guy. He's so cool. I love all his commercials.* [Quinn laughs] *Inspiring to see a cool person like that smoking. Yeah. Hell yeah.*

Quinn: [laughs] I feel like this episode now needs a disclaimer of some writing to be compliant.

[laughter]

Austin: [as Stoney] *Yeah, the cool nicotine. Yeah.*

Quinn: Smoking is not cool, kids.

Austin: [as Stoney] *I love watching television.*

Quinn: Smoking is not cool. Don't smoke [Austin laughs] until you're 18, and then do what you want. Anyway, so you and Ace are enjoying the cigarette and looking out at the setting sun. It's just quiet for a little while. There's a lot of quiet time when you're out on deployment. A couple minutes roll by, and finally, he takes a last drag and crunches the cigarette beneath his boot. [as Ace] *You ready for the mission?*

Austin: [as Stoney] *Look, man, I've trained all I can train. I'm ready. I'm ready to face what's in front of me, but I don't know what that's going to be. So, let's just say, hell yeah, let's do it.*

Quinn: [as Ace] [laughs] I feel like we should establish some history between you and Ace, because you two have been serving together for, I think, probably two years now.

Austin: Okay.

Quinn: What do you think brought the two of you together? On the battlefield or just on a day-to-day basis, what do you think made the two of you close?

Austin: I'm going to say comic books. I think there was some underground comic books that one of us brought in when there was just nothing interesting to do. I think we got into this comic book underground ring of trading, and swapping and trying to get more comics into the base, and then maybe we both got in trouble for it, but [Quinn laughs] they're probably not restricted. I don't know enough about that. But I think it was like, it was too fun. We were enjoying it too much. Like, it was too much fun that we were--

Quinn: Yeah, you were slack and you weren't performing your duties. Bunk wasn't properly made or things weren't polished in the right place, all that.

Austin: Right. I would say we weren't geeks. Like, we didn't come from a geek community or anything. We weren't already comic book fans. But I think it was something that became an escape from the realities of going into a war that we didn't think we were going to be signing up for.

Quinn: Mm-hmm. What's Stoney's favorite comic, do you think?

Austin: I think his favorite comic was a cheesy, like a golden age character.

Quinn: Mm-hmm.

Austin: Have him be Greek inspired, like Thor. Or, not Greek inspired, but ancient God inspired. Then maybe it's like *Hermes*, the Flash meets Thor *Hermes* character. [Quinn laughs] And so, he he's got the winged sandals and he can go really fast. It's this gee whiz kind of character.

Quinn: I like it.

Austin: Yeah. And then, so he would outwit his enemies and could go fast and was a trickster.

Quinn: That's amazing, because I was actually thinking that Ace's favorite hero was the Flash.

Austin: Oh, okay.

Quinn: So, [chuckles] that's like, it's a perfect segue for them bonding, because they have--

Austin: Yeah, because they both love-- [crosstalk]

Quinn: Same or similar heroes. Yeah.

Austin: Yeah. Yeah.

Quinn: I think Ace loves-- We're just going to call this Hero Hermes.

Austin: yeah.

Quinn: I think Ace loves Hermes, because he's a big guy and he does not move very quickly, and so it's like a nice escapism for him. It's like, that he really enjoys. So, maybe different reasons for the fandom, but super into it.

Austin: Yeah. Maybe tonight we're like, [as Stoney] *Hey, man, you see that new Hermes comic? He fights that big panda?*

Quinn: [as Ace] *Now, is that the one where he runs so fast that he goes back in time?*

Austin: [as Stoney] *Yeah. Man, he goes back into-- and then it's like a side dimension where there's pandas everywhere.*

Quinn: [as Ace] *That shit kills me, man.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *And the big evil panda took over panda New York, and so he had to-- Oh, man, that chuckled me up, man.*

Quinn: [as Ace] *New pansterdam?* [Austin laughs] *I heard it used to be called New Amsterdam, so you get the joke?*

Austin: [as Stoney] *I don't know, man. Those writers, I don't know what they're doing. They're running out of [Quinn laughs] ideas for--*

Quinn: [as Ace] *I tell you what, Stoneman, maybe after this is all over, you and I can go write some comic books back in New York City.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *Oh, my God, that sounds amazing. Next week, we got a little bit of extra time on base. We should start cooking up some concepts, you know?*

Quinn: [as Ace] *Hell yeah, man. Let's do it.* I think the two of you are having this conversation about *Hermes* and writing comic books. A really young guy comes over and is like, [as Dax] *All right, y'all, it's time to mount up. It's time for the briefing. Come on, let's go. Let's get it on.*

It's a Private First-Class, Dax Brewer. He's from Texas. I don't think the part of Texas that you're from, Specialist Lock, but definitely a cowboy. You've been serving together for, I think, just a couple months. He's already-- Well, I don't know. You tell me if he's gotten on your right side or your wrong side, but he's definitely a shoot from the hip, go get him, very brave, but also some might call reckless.

Austin: Sure. I think Stoney is probably still in that age of his youth, where he's still very impressionable. I think he has a hard time just seeing people negatively. I think he's really just a big sponge who's soaking in everybody and thinking like, [as Stoney] *Oh, wow, he's cool. Yeah, all right, that's cool too.* [laughs]

Quinn: All right.

Austin: So, I think he's a little inspired by him.

Quinn: Okay. So, PFC Brewer comes and claps the two of you on the back and says, [as Dax] *All right, y'all, let's go. Time for the briefing.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *Cool. Let's do it.*

Quinn: You head to the command tent, where the rest of your platoon is gathered. There's about 40 of you, all sold. At the head of the tent is Lieutenant Diaz, who is the head of your platoon. [as Diaz] *All right, folks. Have a seat. We've got new orders from command. The aerial assault campaign has severely weakened the Iraqi position. In three days, coalition forces will begin a major ground offensive, codenamed Desert Storm. But as you know, Rangers lead the way.*

Our mission is to secure control of a high profile strategic and cultural asset in advance of the armored divisions, an antiquity site located in a defensible high ground position. Intelligence does suggest there may be hostile presence at this location. We will be departing this camp at 0300 and we expect to arrive at 0600. Any questions?

Austin: [as Stoney] *Sir, yessir.*

Quinn: [laughs] [as Diaz] *I like your attitude.* I think the room is quiet.

Austin: [as Stoney] *Sir, what kind of threat are we looking at?*

Quinn: Diaz looks at you and says, [as Diaz] *It's possible there may still be some members of the Iraqi military there. It's possible there may be some irregular military forces as well. Although the site was not explicitly targeted during the aerial campaign, it's possible that there may be structural damage that we need to be cognizant of.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *All right. Thank you, sir.*

Quinn: [as Diaz] *Any other questions?*

Austin: [as Stoney] *When do we go?*

Quinn: [as Diaz] *0300. Specialist, pay attention. Clean the sand out of your ears.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *[chuckles] You got it, sir.*

Quinn: And you all break. It is the middle of the night when you leave. Not technically midnight, I suppose, but 0300. It's 03:00 in the morning. It is dark, and the stars overhead are bright and gleaming. The journey takes about three hours. You arrive at your destination shortly before dawn. The horizon glowing bright orange and yellow.

The village ahead of you on a gently sloping hill is composed of about 20 beige and ECRU buildings, mostly one or two stories in a fairly compact arrangement. Even from a distance, you can tell that the structures appear to be damaged, from small pieces missing to collapsed walls and ceilings. But there is no sign of any activity as you and the rest of your squad begin to fan out in small fire teams and make your approach.

You are on a team with Sergeant Jackson, PFC Brewer and Private Whitney, a very, very green fresh recruit, but generally seems to have a good head on his shoulders. It doesn't take you long to realize and to receive the information from the rest of your team via radio that this site is empty. There are no people here.

Austin: [as Stoney] *Huh. There's nobody here, you, guys. That's--*

Quinn: [as Dax] *Downright strange, you ask me.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *What was our intel? Intel said there were people here.*

Quinn: [as Dax] *Intel said there might be people here.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *All right.*

Quinn: [as Dax] *Intel's not perfect. You know what they say about military intelligence.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *Yeah. Well, I don't like it.*

Quinn: [as Dax] *Makes it easier for us, if you ask me.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *All right. Well, everybody keep your eyes out.*

Quinn: [as Dax] *Keep clearing. Specialist Lock, why don't you go ahead and roll to investigate a mystery for me?*

Austin: You got it, and that is under sharp.

Quinn: Yes.

Austin: Yes. Okay. Here we go. First roll. [rolls dice] That is a 5. Wait, plus 1 is 6.

Quinn: [laughs] Okay. I think you're working your way through. And you step in to clear one of the buildings. As you do so, you trip over something that you were not expecting. You fall to the ground, and sand just splashes up into all of your gear. I think you're going to take a minus 1 forward, so the next time you use your, any of your weapons, you're going to take a minus 1 forward due to this grit and sand.

Austin: [as Stoney] *God damn it. Why do I clean this if this is just going to happen?*

Quinn: Ace comes up behind you, lifts you up off the ground and says, [as Ace] *All right, Stoneman, you got to stay on your feet. You're going to let a body trip you up?*

Austin: [as Stoney] *I tripped over-- Wait, I trip over a body?*

Quinn: [as Ace] *You turn around, and look and see that--* It was mostly concealed beneath sand. But near the doorway to this building is a body. It appears to be an Iraqi civilian. What strikes you immediately as a soldier, is that they very clearly weren't killed by gunfire. The body that you see looks desiccated. It looks horribly dried out and weather worn. You would almost say mummified, but lacking any of the wrappings. But it looks completely dried out.

Austin: Like, an old ice mummy or something.

Quinn: Yeah. It is mostly buried in sand.

Austin: [as Stoney] *Holy shit. How old is this body?*

Quinn: [as Ace] *You're the medic, specialist. Check it out.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *Yeah, I'm going to investigate. Yeah, I'm going to take a look.*

Quinn: Give me another roll to investigate a mystery.

Austin: Okay. [rolls dice] That is a 5.

Quinn: [laughs] Okay. There will be no mystery solved today.

Austin: No, I don't think so.

Quinn: [laughs] So, you move over and you make a move to investigate. As you place your hands on this body, it straight up crumbles. Like, it just crumbles into dust.

Austin: [as Stoney] *You saw that, right? Did I find a mummy? That's ancient corpse. What is it? The hell?*

Quinn: I think PFC Brewer entered just prior to this and be like, [as Dax] *What the hell did you do, man? Got to follow some basic protocols here.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *Hey, I'm as confused as you are. I tripped over the dang thing. it's weird. Let's case the joint. I don't like this.*

Quinn: You examine the rest of the building and you don't find any other bodies. You do see that it looks pretty weathered. Beyond the structural damage, there's also just a lot of signs of wear and tear, almost as though it's like old.

Austin: But there are still modern—Like, this is still a relatively modern building.

Quinn: Yeah, it looks almost artificially weathered.

Austin: Weird.

Quinn: But you don't find any other people in there, living or dead.

Austin: [as Stoney] *Well, all right, I guess we should move on, huh?*

Quinn: [as Dax] *Mm-hmm.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *Just don't-- Watch where you step and don't touch anything.*

Quinn: The four of you continue through your sweep. I think after 10 or 15 minutes, you hear on your radio, Lieutenant Diaz, [as Diaz] *Bravo Squad, report to the north squadron. We need assistance.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *Yes, sir. Over.*

Quinn: You and the rest of your squad make your way that direction. I think there's some subsequent orders for Charlie and Delta to take up positions, defensive positions. But you are rendezvousing with Alpha Team.

You make your way to a relatively unassuming building and head inside. You can see Alpha Team there, but they are not the most interesting things in this building. In front of you is what appears to be some sort of dig site, although for what is not immediately clear. There's some equipment in this area, floodlights, industrial fans, assorted hand tools, but it has all either been destroyed or is just scattered around this large open room in disarray. At the center of all of this is what appears to be a carefully excavated passageway that leads downward into the darkness. The air coming up from it is hot and dusty.

Austin: [as Stoney] *Holy crap. What'd you guys find?*

Quinn: [as Diaz] *It's a very good question. Looks like some dig site. Not sure for what. Bravo, we're going to need you to go down in there and check it out. Secure whatever is in there while we hold down the exterior here.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *Yes, sir.*

Quinn: [as Dax] *Sir. Yes, sir. We're on it.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *Oh, boy. Hey, off the record, this is cool as hell.*

Quinn: [as Dax] *Let's go, Hermes.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *Let's do it.*

Quinn: Is there anything you would like to do at the exterior before you go in?

Austin: I think, hmm, it's probably worth looking around. Probably, I can try investigating a mystery.

Quinn: Sure. Give me a roll.

Austin: Okay.

Quinn: Let's see how many times you can fail investigate a mystery. [laughs]

Austin: I'd love to know. [rolls dice] That is going to be an 8.

Quinn: Okay. That is not a failure.

Austin: All right.

Quinn: Hold 1.

Austin: I think what happened here. Yeah.

Quinn: Lieutenant Diaz gives you some time to get ready. I think the rest of the team is using that to check their flashlights and the rest of their equipment, just make sure that they're prepared. But Specialist Lock, you take a bit of time to walk around. And combing through the equipment, you can tell a few things about what happened here.

First is that this passageway was intentionally excavated. It's not clear if it existed before, but it's not naturally occurring to the extent that it exists now. It was excavated carefully. The tools that you find are hand tools. They're not power tools. The current status of all of the equipment makes it look like it was all blasted outward from the entrance to this passageway.

Austin: Hmm. Okay. So, they came out this way, not necessarily went in?

Quinn: That's a reasonable interpretation.

Austin: Hmm. Does it look like people made an effort to reinforce the holes? Are there support structures?

Quinn: Yes.

Austin: Okay.

Quinn: This passageway was meant to last.

Austin: Okay.

Quinn: Although I will say some of them look like they've been slightly damaged.

Austin: Yeah. Then I'll probably point that out. [as Stoney] *Hey, it's interesting. It looks like they meant this as a long-term thing. We might have company down there.*

Quinn: [as Diaz] *Good eye, specialist. Stay frosty.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *Will do.*

Quinn: The rest of the team is now ready. And so, the four of you start heading down this tunnel. It gets quite narrow once you're past the entry point, and winds several turns and corners. You get a deep sense of claustrophobia. It is hot and stale even below the ground. The walls seem like they press inwards towards you as you make your way inside.

There are no branches in the tunnel, no alternate pathways. And so, you know when you have arrived at your destination, because it is the only place that you could arrive. A small chamber about 10ft by 10ft, it's just barely tall enough for you to stand in. You are the tallest person in your squad, so it's maybe a little bit more comfortable for the rest. But for you, it is quite small. At the center of this cramped chamber is a disk. It is about 6ft in diameter. As the beam of your flashlight passes over its black metal surface gleams back at you.

Austin: [as Stoney] *Hey, we got something here.*

Quinn: The rest of your team has certainly noticed, and they start fanning out to take a look at it. Ace approaches it cautiously and just looking it over.

Austin: [as Stoney] *Ace, what do you see?*

Quinn: [as Ace] *I don't rightly know. Maybe some sort of antiquity, some artifact of some kind.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *Well, whatever you do I-- The last thing I touched turned to dust, so maybe we have some kid gloves here.*

Quinn: You see Dax Brewer leaning over it with his flashlight. [as Dax] *Hey, Whitney, look at this. This is crazy. Take a look.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *Hey, guys, let's not get too distracted. We're on a job here. We're looking for people. Not discs. So, let's keep our eyes out and keep moving if we can.*

Quinn: So, this chamber is the end of the line. The tunnel does not go any further.

Austin: [as Stoney] *I guess we might as well look around. This is what they were digging for.*

Quinn: Give me a roll to investigate a mystery.

Austin: Let's do it. [rolls dice] Oh. No, I don't think so. It's a 5.

Quinn: Oh, my goodness. Okay. Tell me what you're looking for. Like, tell me what you're looking around. What does it look like as you're investigating this?

Austin: I think Stoney is looking for more signs of life and signs of intent, what they were setting up for, what they were really trying to get out of this endeavor.

Quinn: You're looking around. Unlike up top, you don't see any equipment down here. There's really nothing except for this disc. I think as you're looking around, you feel something just lightly land on your head, and you realize that a bit of dirt has fallen on your head from the ceiling above.

Austin: [as Stoney] *Hey, y'all, don't move too suddenly. Just be aware. Some dirt has landed on my head. It might be nothing, but it also might be an unstable place that we have walked into. I don't know, get into it under a door frame or under a desk, [Quinn laughs] if possible. But just be aware that this could cave in at any moment and be mindful of it.*

Quinn: As you are saying that, I think everyone stops and freezes. And for a second, there's just silence as everyone's trying to make sure that this place you're in is still stable. And then, Ace's radio crackles on. The signal isn't great. It's difficult to hear, but I think you can barely make out the words, hostile contact and Bravo team.

Austin: [as Stoney] *Shit. We got to move. They need backup. If that's what they need let's move.*

Quinn: [as Ace] *Let's go. Move out.* The four of you begin moving up the tunnel. Ace is at the front. You're right behind, followed by Brewer and Whitney. Just as you are leaving this chamber, you hear a scream behind you. You look back, and Whitney is-- It looks like sliding backwards into the room, almost as though he's falling downhill, even though it's just a slight grade down. And so, the only thing that makes sense to you, is that somehow he's being pulled, but you can't tell by what.

Austin: [as Stoney] *Whitney.*

Quinn: [as Whitney] *Help. Something's got me.*

Austin: I run towards him.

Quinn: Okay. If you wanted to read a bad situation, you certainly could at this moment.

Austin: Okay. I'm going to read a bad situation.

Quinn: Go and give me that roll.

Austin: Okay. When I do that, I have the ability tactical genius?

Quinn: Wow. A little like high and mighty, but okay.

Austin: [chuckles] Yeah.

Quinn: [laughs]

Austin: Before, I had battlefield awareness, but we've shifted a few things with a playbook. I've got heavy combat armor now instead of a flak vest. And so, therefore, I've got tactical genius, which lets me use, plus cool instead of plus sharp for read a bad situation. So, try that.

Quinn: Yeah, fits your military training.

Austin: Yeah. All right. [rolls dice] Well, that is a 7.

Quinn: Okay. That is a mixed success. So, go ahead and hold 1.

Austin: I think it's got to be, what's the best way to protect the victims right now?

Quinn: I think your initial instinct is correct. Something is pulling or dragging Private Whitney. You need to get to them and stop them from being dragged in.

Austin: Okay. I'm going to try to dash forward as much as possible and grab hold.

Quinn: Give me a roll to protect someone.

Austin: Okay. [rolls dice] 5, 6, 8. That's an 8.

Quinn: On a 7 plus, you protect them okay, but you're going to suffer some or all of the harm they were going to get.

Austin: Oof.

Quinn: How does it look as you save Private Whitney? Tell me about saving Private Whitney.

Austin: [laughs] Well, it all started on D day. See?

Quinn: [laughs]

Austin: No, I think it's going to be--

Quinn: We go back another 50 years.

Austin: [laughs] I think it's going to be one of those big-- My hand grabs his elbow, basically like a full forearm to forearm grip, and I can just try to pull as much as I can.

Quinn: So, you grab hold of Private Whitney and you brace. You feel a strong pull back towards this chamber. But then, it stops. Whatever it is releases Private Whitney and they go scrambling back up the tunnel. I think to do this, you had to drop your gun. And so, your flashlight is lowered.

And on the ground, you can see this shifting snake like coil of sand moving on its own. As it releases Private Whitney's leg, it rears back and lashes out towards you and strikes you square in the chest. You feel the wind just get knocked straight out of you. You're going to take 2 harm which will not harm you with your combat armor.

Austin: Oh, that's right. No, it will not. Wow. Yeah, obviously, normally, he would react very strongly to that. I think he's just doubled down on all fours at this point. But he's got to get out of there. I'm going to just try to scabble backwards to try to get out of the chamber and make sure Whitney's should be already running, hopefully.

Quinn: Yeah. PFC Brewer has Whitney by the arm and they're making their way up the tunnel. You're the closest target for this featureless snake of sand.

Austin: Yeah. I might try to make an attempt to get to my gun.

Quinn: Your gun, I think, is on a sling. I think you've still got a hold of it.

Austin: Okay.

Quinn: I think the question is, if you want to fire it, and if so, are you trying to lay down some cover or are you trying to do some damage? That'll determine what you want to roll.

Austin: I think he's not going to try to fire until he's out of the room. He's going to try to just back up as much as possible before remembering that I can even shoot at it.

Quinn: Give me a roll to act under pressure.

Austin: [rolls dice] That is 7.

Quinn: On a 7 to 9, I'm going to give you a worse outcome, a hard choice or a price to pay. I'm going to give you a choice here. I think either this thing is going to lash out at you again on your way out. It is going to ensnare you as you try to escape, or it is going to pursue you in unexpected ways.

Austin: I think I'm going to have to just have it pursue me in unexpected ways.

Quinn: Do you still have your light on it as you run, or are you full turn and run? Is this a careful retreat or is this a full out sprint away?

Austin: No, I think this is a careful retreat.

Quinn: Okay.

Austin: I don't really want to have my back to it.

Quinn: Fair. So, you're bringing up the rear of your squad, moving as quickly as you can backwards. You see this-- It looks almost like a river. It looks almost like a river of sand. Start snaking its way up the tunnel, and then you see another one winding its way up one of the walls, and a third working its way up the ceiling. As you make your way out, all of these small tendrils of sand are serpentineing up the tunnel around you.

You clear the exit to the passageway and the rest of your squad is there. But as you do so, all of these tendrils come snaking out of the tunnel around you. There are now five tendrils of sand whipping around this small building.

Austin: [as Stoney] *We got to go. We got to go, we got to go, we got to go.*

Quinn: Okay. [chuckles] I think around you, you see Sergeant Jackson is standing at the entrance to the building with Private Whitney. I think you can tell immediately they're on the same page. PFC Brewer is shooting at the tendrils.

Austin: I think at this point, I will also open fire.

Quinn: Are you trying to do damage or are you trying to protect a Brewer?

Austin: I think I want to do damage to them at this point. I want to know my enemy, if we can stop him, because we're going to keep running but we got to do something.

Quinn: Give me a roll to kick some ass.

Austin: Got it. [rolls dice] 10.

Quinn: On a 10 plus, you inflict harm as established and you get to choose an extra effect.

Austin: Okay.

Quinn: You gain the advantage. Take plus 1 forward or give plus 1 forward to another hunter. You inflict terrible harm, plus 1 harm. You suffer less harm, minus 1 harm, or you force them where you want them.

Austin: It's got to be force them where I want them.

Quinn: Where do you want them?

Austin: If I can get them back inside the tunnel, use maybe grenades to try to take out the support structures and trap them inside.

Quinn: Yeah. Okay. So, we'll say that PFC Brewer has grenades. So, the two of you in tandem open fire. I think as this is happening, one of the tendrils of sand whips out at you and lands a forceful blow again on your torso. You are going to take two harm, again. You're protected by your armor

Austin: Right.

Quinn: In turn, your gunfire cuts through these sand serpents. You almost disrupt the integrity of their formation, and they all collapse one after one. You can see the sand pooling around the entrance to this tunnel. But PFC Brewer pulls the pin out of a grenade, lobs it into the tunnel. And just a few seconds later, there is a loud explosion that rings in your ears, and you can feel the reverberations in your boots, and you hear and see that tunnel collapse.

Austin: Great. [chuckles] We want to just keep on moving out of there.

Quinn: So, you exit the building. You can tell immediately that something is not right, because outside, there is a sandstorm brewing. The wind has picked up. You can feel the bite of small particles of sand against your face. Your visibility is pretty severely diminished. There was no sign of any inclement weather when you went down there just 10, 15 minutes ago.

Austin: Did we get out here in vehicles?

Quinn: That's a good question. Let's say yes. Let's say you had a Humvee.

Austin: Okay. Yeah, because we got to get to that.

Quinn: I think also as you exit this building, your radio crackles on again and you have a bit better reception now. The signal is a bit better, and you can hear Lieutenant Diaz's voice come on. [as Diaz] *Delta, report. Delta? Delta, do you copy? Charlie? Charlie, do you copy? Bravo? Bravo, are you there?*

Austin: [as Stoney] *We're here, Alpha.*

Quinn: [as Diaz] *Thank God. Listen, we're pinned down just outside of the east quadrant in a two-story structure. It's a giant sand fist. It's trying to batter us down. We need backup.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *Roger that. We got some wild shit over here too, sir. We'll make it happen. We'll be there.*

Quinn: Your squad heads out. It doesn't take you long to recognize where you need to be going. You can hear. As you get closer, see gunfire. As you approach, you see and possibly even stranger sight than what you just witnessed. Up ahead of you, there is a massive hand about the size of your Humvee, composed entirely of sand that is battering this building. You can see it is caving in the walls. This building has maybe a minute before it goes down. What do you do?

Austin: I'm going to read a bad situation.

Quinn: Yeah, that's a pretty solid idea. That seems pretty solid. Go ahead and read-

Austin: uh-huh.

Quinn: -read a bad situation.

Austin: Okay.

Quinn: You tactical genius, you.

Austin: [chuckles] [rolls dice] Good news, because that's an 11.

Quinn: Okay, there we go. Stoney was not meant to investigate mysteries.

Austin: No. He's not a Scooby gang kind of guy.

Quinn: On a 10 plus, hold 3.

Austin: All right, it's going to be best way in, best way out, best way to protect.

Quinn: I think this massive hand seems to be focused on the side of the building that already has been damaged previously. And on the other side, there is a doorway. It's still structurally sound. So, you could get in and you could get out that way. The best way to protect the victims would be if some combination of your squad distracted this thing while some other combination of your squad went in and got everyone in there out through that doorway.

Austin: Okay. Since I'm one of the bigger guys, I think Ace and I will go in for the victims and I can have-- I know that I've been giving a lot of orders here. But in weird situations, we can just say that, who's to say what the chain of command really is in a crisis. It's whoever makes the most sense, I think.

Quinn: Yeah. I think Ace has been backing you up. I think Ace has given some orders as well, but they're a little shell shocked. I think we'll say as the support specialist for your squad. You're commonly in charge of manning the radio, so it makes sense for you to be doing all of the communication with the other squads.

Austin: Yeah, totally.

Quinn: And that's how it fits the narrative.

Austin: Yeah, totally.

Quinn: [laughs]

Austin: So, I think I'd tell Brewer and Whitney to start firing on that thing on the other side, while Ace and I go in.

Quinn: Ace looks at you and he's like, [as Ace] *All right. Let's go, Hermes.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *Rangers lead the way.*

Quinn: So, the two of you make your way inside, as Whitney and Brewer start opening fire. I think as you enter the doorway, you can hear one last structure rattling pound before this thing's attention seems to be diverted, and the quaking stops. You head inside, and you see Lieutenant Diaz and what remains of his squad. You can see there is one private who is dead. Straight up, it looks like he fell like he was on part of the second story and got knocked off. You can see another individual who looks like he has a broken arm, but Diaz and the sergeant of Alpha Team are both okay.

Austin: Then I think we're going to point them in the right direction. If they're okay to move, then we're going to point them where to go, and then I'll grab the body and have Ace probably grab the guy with the broken arm.

Quinn: You give them the instructions. You start hauling the injured and dead out and you clear this building. As you do, you see Private Whitney fly over you about 25ft past you, and collide with a building and fall in a mangled heap on the ground. You see Brewer falling back towards you, shooting wildly at this hand which is encroaching on you.

Austin: [as Stoney] *Whitney, come on, bud.* Oh. I have to run up to him.

Quinn: Yeah, he is dead.

Austin: He's dead. I've got another guy. We're not supposed to leave anyone behind, but I'm just going to drop him and grab Whitney and go.

Quinn: You shoulder Whitney, and your team starts taking off. What's the plan? I know you're not the CO, but this story is about you. So, even if it's Diaz giving the orders, tell me what's the plan is. Like, what does this look like?

Austin: We've got a pile into this Hummer. They've tried shooting, and I think the most logic they can have is just to clear out. To them I think there's not a lot of logic to apply to it other than like sandstorm logic of like, this is like a natural disaster is the closest they can get to it, and that is just to retreat. You can't fight a storm. You got to go in the direction that doesn't look like there's anything. If they can go back to base, if they can go somewhere that looks clear, then I think they got to floor it and go in that direction.

Quinn: Okay. Give me a role to act under pressure as what remains of Alpha and Bravo, try to make it to the Humvee, which is on the outskirts of this village.

Austin: All right. [rolls dice] Well, that's going to be a 6.

Quinn: Oof. Okay. You all are running. And PFC Brewer is taking up the rear, almost a little too excited about all this. This hand moves towards them, and they're just opening fire with their assault rifle. You can see little holes starting to appear in it. More and more of these holes appear. Just as it's about to collide with Brewer, it falls into tatters and just a spray of sand washes over him. He lets out a raucous [as Dax] *Yee-haw*, and turns back to look at you all. As he does, he is abruptly yanks beneath the sand and disappears.

Austin: [as Stoney] *Brewer.*

Quinn: He is just in an instant gone. Ace grabs you by the shoulder and says, [as Ace] *We got to go, man. We got to go. Come on.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *We got to get-- Oh.*

Quinn: [as Ace] *We're not going digging through the sand. Let's go.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *All right. Go-- Keep going.*

Quinn: You, Diaz, Jackson and the other sergeant keep going towards the Humvee. As you do, you can see moving beneath the sand almost like sharks beneath the water, just these long tendrils snaking out around and towards you as you make your way towards the Humvee.

Austin: Since I'm still carrying Whitney, and if we just lost Brewer, I might be thinking just as far as the dead weight, [as Stoney] *I'm sorry, man*, and then I let go of Whitney.

Quinn: I don't know if this plays into your realization or if it comes after, but you also realize that you have no idea where the entirety of Charlie or Delta are.

Austin: Yeah. I was hoping we wouldn't have to worry about that yet.

Quinn: Yeah.

Austin: But--

Quinn: Hey, maybe they're fine. [chuckles]

Austin: Yeah, they're probably just hanging out back at base.

Quinn: It's probably fine. You unshoulder Whitney, and start moving faster to try to keep up with everybody else. As you do, you can see the body just sink beneath the sands.

Austin: [as Stoney] *We'll come back for you, soldier. We'll come back for all you.*

Quinn: You arrive at the Humvee. All of you pile in. And the sand is just beating down on this vehicle. Just the sandstorm, like just this thick sand, pasted wind. It sounds like hail almost. Who's driving?

Austin: Whoever would have been the first one at the front. I think it probably would have been Diaz.

Quinn: So, the lieutenant hops in the front, everyone piles in, and they punch it and start tearing out away from this village down the hillside. And in the rearview mirror, you can see this wave of sand rising up in pursuit of you. What do you do?

Austin: I'm going to reach for my gun again. At this point, we forgot about the minus-- What was it? Minus 1 or minus 2 to the sand getting in my gear?

Quinn: Oh, we did, didn't we?

Austin: But I think this is the time where it will manifest. I think that will finally catch up to me.

Quinn: Yeah, that's a good idea.

Austin: Where I will be firing and probably [chuckles] not have any luck at it, but I can give a kick some ass to see what happens.

Quinn: Okay. Give me a roll to kick some ass.

Austin: [rolls dice] So, that's a 10. What do I subtract from that?

Quinn: For the sand in your gun?

Austin: For the sand in the gun,

Quinn: Yeah. So, that's minus 1. So, down to a 9.

Austin: So, 9. Yeah.

Quinn: Are you popping the top and opening fire facing backwards? Are you leaning out the window? What's the situation?

Austin: I think it'd be the hood, just because it's the coolest. [laughs]

Quinn: Yeah.

Austin: It'd be the coolest.

Quinn: That is pretty cool.

Austin: Yeah.

Quinn: So, you open the top of the Humvee and turn around to open fire. You can see that this wave of sand is cresting above you. You take aim, and open fire in a line straight down, cutting through it. It parts most of the way before it crashes over your Humvee. You are going to take 3 harm.

Austin: It's going to get through to me.

Quinn: Yeah. So that's 1 to you.

Austin: Yeah.

Quinn: This wave concusses you backwards into the vehicle. It almost knocks the whole vehicle off of its path. But Diaz is a good driver, and he manages to keep it upright. You regain your bearings, and you look back and there's no wave behind you. And for a moment, I think everyone is just quietly waiting, holding their breath to see if it's over. And then, at your feet on the floor of the Humvee, you feel something moving up your leg. You look to see a pool of sand running up your torso, and the tendril lashes out at Lieutenant Diaz's sergeant, clocks him in the head and knocks him out of the door of the Humvee.

Austin: Oh, Quinn, I don't like this. [chuckles] Oh, boy. Okay. Yikes. So, there's a creature in the car.

Quinn: Yes.

Austin: Boy. I guess I can't really use an assault rifle right now. I'm going to read a bad situation.

Quinn: Go and give me a roll.

Austin: Okay.

Quinn: This is pretty bad. This is not great.

Austin: No. I rolled two 1s. [laughs]

Quinn: Oh.

Austin: I rolled two 1s. Now, I get to add to that, but it's not-- [crosstalk]

Quinn: Probably not enough.

Austin: No. No, I can roll plus cool, so that's a plus 2. So, that's a 4. So, it's not a 2. Not nothing.

Quinn: Okay. Okay. I think you try to take a beat, just to think, just for a second. This tendril of sand rears back. You and Ace and Diaz all flinch. But instead of going for you, it drives straight down. You hear the sound of metal groaning, and shattering and it drops out through the floor of this Humvee and you hear a loud thud as it's taken most of the undercarriage and equipment out of this Humvee as it drops out.

Austin: But Quinn, we need that. We need that.

Quinn: [chuckles]

Austin: Quinn, we need that stuff.

Quinn: You do need that?

Austin: We need that. Why would you take that?

Quinn: You can hear the Humvee starting to slow.

Austin: Yeah, I bet. I think then at that point, I'm going to have us all bail. We got to just run. We just got to run on foot.

Quinn: Yeah. It's unspoken. Everyone just leaps out of the Humvee and starts heading out on foot. I think you can see this serpentine form of whatever this is melt back into the sand. As it does, the waveform starts to emerge again.

Austin: Can I see if there's anything around? Like, were we on a road and were we passing through cities or--?

Quinn: No. You're very, very off the grid.

Austin: Okay. Are we talking just like scrublands, basically, at this point? Like, there's not a building? There's nothing to take cover from--

Quinn: Yeah. There's occasional hills, but almost nothing.

Austin: Then cardinal directions. If I knew roughly which way the base was or if we were generally east or south of the base or something, that I could figure out at least a direction to move?

Quinn: You definitely know the direction of the base, so you can run that direction if you'd like.

Austin: Yeah. We're not going to make it there. So, maybe it doesn't make sense, but nothing makes sense. So, I think he just wants to run in the direction of the base.

Quinn: The three of you are running. This wave is beginning to mount behind you. It seems almost like it's taking its time, which is an unsettling sensation.

Austin: Right.

Quinn: And Lieutenant Diaz stops. He looks at the two of you, pulls up his radio and says, [as Diaz] *This is Lieutenant Marco Diaz, US Army Rangers. I need an air sortie at my location. Coordinates to follow.* His gaze drops for a moment, and then returns to the two of you. [as Diaz] *Run.* He turns back, and starts opening fire on this wave of sand that's headed towards you.

Austin: We nod, and we run.

Quinn: Behind you, you hear gunfire for a little bit, and then it stops. Do you look back at all, or do you just keep running?

Austin: Not one bit. Just keep running.

Quinn: You can hear the sand creeping up behind you slowly and inexorably. But before it reaches you, you hear the familiar sound of United States Air Force jet flying past you. And behind you, there is a deafening explosion and then everything goes black.

When you awaken, you are in a hospital bed. It is bright and peaceful, if a bit sterile. And sitting by your bedside are two men, one of whom you recognize. He is an older man. He's late 30s, stressed in army fatigues. You can tell immediately that it is Colonel McKinley, the Commander of your branch of the incursion. The other you don't recognize. He's a man in his 40s. He has kind of a lantern jaw, very dark, piercing eyes and he's wearing a neatly pressed black suit and black tie.

Austin: Who's the suit?

Quinn: Special Agent O'Shaughnessy, Defense Intelligence Agency. Aberrant Events Division. [as O'Shaughnessy] *You're lucky to be alive, son.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *I wouldn't say lucky, sir. My being alive is the direct result of a lot of brave men. Luck had nothing to do with it.*

Quinn: [as O'Shaughnessy] *Quite a ordeal you went through. Care to tell us about it?*

Austin: [as Stoney] *What do you know already?*

Quinn: [as O'Shaughnessy] *We have a report from a US airman who flew the sortie.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *It was a sandstorm, sir. Big one. One like I'd never seen before. I can't really give you more details than that, because I don't really know him and I'd get him wrong.*

Quinn: Special Agent O'Shaughnessy looks at the Colonel. The Colonel nods and he nods. He turns back to you and smiles ever so slightly. [as O'Shaughnessy] *That's exactly what I wanted to hear. I think as long as we can all agree on that, then I think we can all agree you have served your country to the highest distinction. I'll see to it personally that you receive a proper commendation for your service. I'm thinking at least a Purple Heart. Maybe a Medal of Honor. Let me see what I can do. A honorable discharge will get you back stateside and a nice civilian career. Law enforcement, perhaps. We can talk about it.*

Austin: [as Stoney] *Thank you, sir. I would say Stoney lost a lot of taste for comic books on that day.*

Quinn: Yeah.

Austin: And also, definitely not excited to watch the *Mummy* franchise.

Quinn: [laughs]

Austin: That was a bad trailer with the face comes out.

Quinn: [laughs]

Austin: When the face comes out of the sand and he's like, [as Stoney] *Nah, I got to leave this theater.*

Quinn: Yeah. You never saw a face, but I think it's maybe just a little too close to home.

Austin: Yeah.

Quinn: What do we think happened to Ace?

Austin: I think Ace survived.

Quinn: You keep in touch?

Austin: No. No, we don't. No, I think we stopped talking. I think we understood that silence was expected. I think if we talked, it would be a reminder that that really happened. The military made it easy to forget, and he was okay with that until he moved to Firmament. And maybe sometimes now he thinks about Ace.

Quinn: I think that's the perfect place to end it.

Austin: Yeah.

Quinn: Thank you, Austin, for reprising your role. I know it was a little heavy, but I'm really glad we got to do this and delve a little bit more into Stoney's backstory, since it was mostly combat last time you joined us.

Austin: Yeah, man, that was a trip. That was really fun, dude. Thanks a lot.

Quinn: Austin, you want to tell us where else we can find you and can find your work?

Austin: Yeah, totally. Yeah, you can find me on Twitter [@austinabridged](#). And you can also check out my podcast, Saturday Morning Tuesdays, on iTunes, Spotify, Google, wherever you want to find it and check me out.

Quinn: Thank you again for joining us. And thanks, everyone, for listening. That will conclude our special bonus episode of Monster hour. Until next time, keep it spooky.

[music]

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