

Chapter 680

Not Enough Monsters to Fight

For Humphrey and his team, the fight had reached a new peak of intensity. After Belinda's wide-scale destruction using her lightning tether, the messengers had sent a storm of summoned monsters to assault Onslow's tortoiseshell mini-fortress. Rather than being placed on the defensive, however, they were taking the fight to the enemy. Clive's Mana Tide spell had the team operating above and beyond their normal levels, giving them the mana to throw everything they had at the enemy.

Humphrey cut a spectacular figure, hurling himself at the monsters while spraying out dragon breath. He dashed through the air, unloading blow after blow from his humungous dragon wing sword, spinning like a top as his Unstoppable Force attack carved troughs through the bodies of the monsters that dove in to surround him.

Once his mainstay attack, Unstoppable Force could no longer one-shot monsters the way it did at low ranks, but it still excelled when many monsters fell within reach. Not only did it blast concussive force out with every hit, extending the reach of the attack, but the cooldown was reduced for every enemy struck. With monsters all around, he was able to burn through mana and stamina firing it off again and again.

The monsters quickly learned that being too close to Humphrey was a good way to get their faces carved off, or whatever the bizarre creatures had instead of a face. Their overeagerness to box him in waned and they dropped back to make ranged attacks, forcing him to engage only a couple of them at a time.

Humphrey was unperturbed. Humans were masters of special attacks and Humphrey was a variety of them for every situation. Rising to the fore in his repertoire was an attack that had gone largely overlooked when his rank was lower and he monsters weaker. Relentless Assault had no cooldown and increased in damage every time it was used in quick succession. This let Humphrey chop his way through monsters like a lumberjack felling a tree before using a dash attack or teleport to keep his sequence going with the next monster.

There were so many monsters in the air that Humphrey had no trouble maintaining his attack sequence. As the special attack reached certain thresholds, it started adding resonating and disruptive force to his blows, smashing apart armour and magical shields respectively. As the messenger's strange summons often had one or both, it made Humphrey all the more effective.

His Relentless Assault escalated in power beyond anything he had seen before as he went through monster after monster. It started landing with explosive force, eliminating summons in just a handful of hits. There was a commensurate cost, however, as the ability came with a stamina cost, rather than mana. The more he used it, the faster Humphrey exhausted himself. This was where one of Humphrey's human gifts came into play.

Ability: [Magic Warrior]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Essence Gift].
- You may expend stamina in place of mana and mana in place of stamina.

Humans were unique amongst essence-using species in that none of their inherent abilities did anything without essences. Where every leonid was strong and every elf graceful, humans got nothing until they absorbed an essence. The most representative power humans had were four blank powers, called essence gifts, that would evolve automatically, one-by-one as essences were claimed.

That Humphrey, on absorbing the magic essence, gained a power that would let him throw everything he had into his endeavours before he dropped surprised absolutely no one. The ability to use mana and stamina interchangeably meant that he could keep throwing out powers when the mana or stamina to fuel them was depleted, until he had absolutely nothing left.

Relentless assault was growing more expensive with every strike, the stamina cost growing and growing. But so long as Clive's Mana Tide lasted, so would Humphrey.

Marek Nior Vargas was the messenger leading the breach force over what the people of Yareh called the entertainment district. It was no surprise that the inferior species would dedicate so much time and resources to pointless frivolity. He was happy enough to be the one to make an example of the base creatures, quivering underground like rodents, even if he did not care for the operation as a whole.

There was little to be gained in making the attack on the city, whatever the Voice of the Will, Jes Fin Kaal, might say about morale. He had seen over and over again that, when pushed, even the least of sapient species would push back. Only a prolonged, inter-generational oppression could truly break a people, which Marek had seen for himself over and over again. So had Kaal, so he knew that her assertions were a lie.

Marek was not above participating in politics, if only to protect himself. He detested the ambitions that led to political games. They, in turn, led to internecine sniping that only

served to weaken the messengers as a whole. As a realist, Marek recognised that most messengers gave little more than lip service to serving their kind as a whole. They were obsessed with standing at the top as individuals, rather than standing together as a people. This was as true of the least silver-ranker all the way up to astral kings.

It was hard to blame them. Every doctrine the messengers held told them that they were superior simply by existing, so what did they have left to overcome but one another? Marek was not so foolish as to accept the indoctrination, however. He had seen much, from messengers stricken with fear to members of the servant races as powerful as any messenger. This man Asano was just another example, wherever he was.

Marek was high above the city, just below the barrier dome. He and his fellow gold-rankers clashed with their adventurer counterparts, reaching a stalemate for the moment. Marek was fine with this state of affairs, as his priority was not the success of their objective. He was not going to sabotage the directives he was given, but neither would he take any undue risk to see it done. Ending the raid with minimal messenger casualties took precedence over killing a few livestock in a hole.

His fellow gold-rankers were smart enough to know the city was not worth their lives and acted with appropriate caution. The silver-rankers, on the other hand, needed to be reined-in. Seeking glory and caught up in ideas of their own invincibility, some of them had already fallen. Despite his directives that they take no risks, many had overreached when sent to impede any adventurers too effective at thinning out the monsters.

Marek's attention was drawn to one particular group. They were far from the most effective at slaying monsters, although that trick with the lighting tethers had earned Marek's approval. He appreciated a power used well over one that was mindlessly strong, and unlike many messengers, could respect a capable enemy. They had already killed a couple of messengers that had gone after them, gaining Marek's attention. The survivor of that sortie had raved when forbidden from gathering more messengers and attacking again.

Marek judged that the group was more of a threat to individual messengers than the monster horde. Even after the trick with the lightning, he did no more than send additional monsters to harass them. Clearly they had skill, but without the ability to produce regular attacks on the scale of the lightning, their threat to the operation was limited. The girl throwing around miniature hurricanes was much more of a problem, which is why he had sent one of his more reliable teams to harass her. It didn't matter if they failed to secured the kill, so long as she wasn't rampantly tearing apart their summoned forces.

Another concern was someone even Marek had a hard time pinning down. Operating amongst the monsters, what he presumed to be an adventurer was moving through their forces with seeming impunity. His aura was hard to sense even for Marek, but the glimpses he caught confirmed it was silver-rank, and highly unusual for an essence user. He suspected this was the man Asano that Jes Fin Kaal was interested in, but Marek did not care. Until it was confirmed and he was forced to act by order, he would not take action personally.

What he did do was send some messengers to contain the man. He had somehow gained the disturbing ability to produce Harbingers of Doom, the cataclysmic butterflies that should definitely not be found on a world like this. The fact that a cosmic weapon was not only being used in an isolated universe and at such a low rank was further evidence that the man was Asano.

Marek was not going to check unless he absolutely had to. He deployed a few messengers to keep things in under control, as the butterflies were not dangerous if caught early. He again sent some of his more reliable people, however, for if the butterflies were allowed to propagate, it would spell doom for the operation. He knew from experience that if not stopped quickly and thoroughly, they would eventually spread faster than the summoners could reproduce the destroyed monsters.

He passed his attention over the area, seeing a dangerous spread of afflictions, but nothing that couldn't be absorbed. So long as the butterflies were contained, he need pay it no more mind for the moment. He returned his attention to the group centred on a flying tortoise shell, considering if they were worth more attention after all. He could sense some manner of ability drawing magic through the dimensional membrane, fuelling an escalation in their battle that was overwhelming the additional monsters he had sent. Out of curiosity, he directed even more monsters their way to see how they performed.

As the most straightforward team member, Humphrey was easy to overlook. Jason, Clive, Belinda and Sophie were all various levels of unconventional, while Humphrey was a textbook brawler. But as a fresh wave of monsters broke off from the main force to assault Onslow's shell, he took centre stage. The monsters were numerous, but he was no longer alone amongst the horde. He was also no longer relying on his own power alone.

With the support of the team, Humphrey became an engine of monster annihilation. Buffs turned his special attacks from weapons into ordnance. Neil's shields, themselves boosted by Clive's Mana Tide spell, meant Humphrey's armour was not under constant

barrage. He also had a mantle of glowing runes, courtesy of Clive, but the most important boosts came from the stacked aura powers.

Humphrey's own aura boosted his power and spirit attributes. Belinda and Clive boosted mana recovery, reduced ability costs and reduced cooldowns. Neil's caused enemies to drop floating spheres of life force and mana that anyone in the team could absorb, while Sophie's power enhanced other forms of mana and stamina recovery, boosting what the others offered. On top of all this was Clive's Mana Tide, increasing mana recovery with each passing minute.

Humphrey's items further reduced the cost of his powers, meaning that Humphrey's powers cost far less than the baseline while his resources to spend on them were overflowing. Humphrey had the chance to do something he had never been able to do before: go completely wild. No cooldown management, no mana management; throwing out special attacks as fast as he could swing his sword.

The Relentless Assault ability proved more and more aptly named. He blasted his Fire Breath power without pausing, his sword still swinging as flames poured from his mouth. He used other special attacks like Flying Leap and Dive Bomb to move between monsters, but these were combination attacks. He was able to link them to his Relentless Assault, the sequence never stopping.

The rest of the team also opened the taps to full, making the most of the deluge of mana. Sophie has the least advantage as she already had enough mana efficiency that she couldn't empty her mana pool if she tried. Try she did, however, almost impossible to see as she flickered through the sky like a wind spirit. She was growing stronger as the fight wore on but, for the moment, focused on preventing monsters from overrunning Humphrey or Onslow's shell. Clive and Belinda focused on finishing off monsters left in Humphrey's wake, so as to save Humphrey from needing to slow down for cleanup.

Clive overcharged his combat rituals, pushing the limits of what even his exceptional weapons could handle. He shot down stragglers while Belinda cleared any that reached Onslow's shell in fighting shape. She made excellent use of her Force tether and Lighting Tether powers, while also shooting off her staff and wand, interspersing those attacks with attacks she stole from the summons using her Power Thief ability.

Clive fired off his prismatic Wrath of the Magister spell, which Belinda copied with her Mirror Magic ability. At silver rank she could even use the copied spell twice, then reset Clive's cooldown with Blessing of Readiness. He cast it again as she used her magic tattoo to reset Mirror Magic. They cast their spells again, turning what should have been a single spell with extreme power but a long cooldown into six geysers of rainbow

annihilation. With so many monsters, it once again demonstrated that the team could output periodic area damage, and at far greater power levels than normal widespread attacks.

The final piece of their combat puzzle was one of Neil's powers. The unflashy healer had one very flashy ability called Reels of Fortune. Intensely mana hungry, it conjured a set of intangible slot reels that rolled every time he fed it enough mana, the results being random. At silver rank, there was a second set of reels and the results could potentially be much stronger, although the chance for dud rolls remained.

With more mana than he could ordinarily spend, Neil dumped it into the reels over and over. Some rolls were just wasted mana for no effect, while others ranged from moderate team buffs to chain lightning that dashed through the monsters, striking them dead with every stroke. Then Neil finally rolled a jackpot.

Reel of Fortune: Jackpot

- Select a single target ability to affect all enemies and/or allies in the area as appropriate to the chosen ability.
- Duration will be extended or the effect of instantaneous powers will be increased. This will not cost mana or trigger cooldowns.
- Any negative aspects for allies normally produced by the ability will not take effect.

Neil goggled at the system window for a moment, even as he instinctual understanding of the spell confirmed what was written. This was a result he had yet to see from the reels, one of the new results possible at silver rank. As for the spell to choose, he didn't consider anything but one. He made his choice, not even needing to cast the spell. The entire team then had system windows pop up.

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- You have been affected by [Hero's Moment]. All benefits of this ability operate multiplicatively with existing bonus.
 - All attributes are increased.
 - All resistances are increased.
 - Damage reduction is increased.
 - Maximum mana is increased.
 - Maximum stamina is increased.
 - Mana and stamina recovery are increased.
 - All essence ability cooldowns are reduced.
 - All essence ability effects are enhanced.
 - The normal duration of this ability is extended.

- The debilitation suffered after this ability ends will not occur.
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There were not enough monsters to fight. The waves sent their way had been thoroughly disposed of, many of the team's attacks taking out parts of the main horde as collateral. Humphrey didn't wait for more to arrive, plunging into the torrent of monsters still streaming through the breach. The rest of the team, centred or inside Onslow's shell, followed along.