

## Chapter 676

### Breach

Jason and his team were riding inside Onslow's expanded shell toward the entertainment district. Buried under the taverns, clubs, theatres and nightclubs was a massive subterranean bunker, one of the least secure in the city. It was large and magically reinforced, but mostly relied on a sturdy roof, with no active defences that could deter attackers from digging in eventually.

That was usually fine if a monster spawned in the city or some managed to break in during a monster surge, but messengers were more intelligent foes. Not only would they bother to go after the people in the bunker but realise its relative vulnerability. Jason's team and others like it were tasked with holding off the messengers once they made it into the city. Eventually they would be forced to either retreat through the breaches they created in the barrier dome or be trapped inside when they closed.

Jason stood at the edge of Onslow's shell looking out at the dome that spanned over the city. The barrier had already turned from clear to blue as summoned monsters attacked the entire surface of the dome. As it became increasingly stressed it started buzzing like wet power lines, even giving off a similar ozone smell. Most people wouldn't detect it, but Jason's silver-rank olfactory senses could smell the tang of it, even from far below.

Humphrey tilted his head, listening to a voice in his head. He was currently under two communication powers: Jason's linking him to the team, and a gold-ranker coordinating the city defences.

"They're expecting breaches at any moment," he warned. "We'll be on site in only a minute or two, but we may be arriving at a fight already in progress."

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Gary was picking his way along a street far closer to the centre of the city than Jason and his team. This was a part of Yaresh where buildings were made of polished metal and stone rather than living wood. The buildings were also taller, at least the ones that had more than a shattered base pointing jaggedly upward like the hilt of a broken sword.

The street was in ruins, entire sections of building having fallen to the street. Navigating them alternately meant clambering over, skirting around or even going through them, entering through a shattered section of wall and exiting through a door or window that somehow remained intact.

Gary was travelling with other essence users specialised in various crafts, moving closer to the great battle at the centre of the city than most adventurers. The craftspeople had little to no combat experience other than Gary, but that barely mattered. Anyone short of diamond rank who got involved in the fight between the garuda and the serpent monster would die helplessly, combat veteran or not.

Cresting a toppled tower, Gary paused to look up. Debris was raining from the sky as titanic beings smashed apart buildings. Some of the debris was the buildings, landing on other buildings or the wide boulevards like bombs. Dust choked the air, acrid in the lungs of any low-rankers caught in it.

The air was filled with shrill cries from the serpents and the thunderous crashes as the fight destroyed yet more of the city. Behind those irregular sounds was a sonorous hum, growing louder as the barrier endured attacks from the outside. The light filtering through the dome had become a deeper blue, lending the city around Gary the feel of an underwater ruin. He briefly thought back to the village under the lake he, Farrah and Rufus had discovered near Greenstone, shortly before they met Jason for the first time.

He shook his head, his mane dancing around his head. He looked down at where the others were making their way over the obstruction. They may not have been fighters but they still had silver-rank strength, endurance and agility, so they needed no help. The support team of bronze-rankers with them were actual adventurers and were likewise capable.

The only member of the group that had any trouble negotiating the terrain was Gary's summon. A ten foot tall forge golem, it was a humanoid construct of grime-black industrial metal. The glow of molten metal radiated from the joints, between the metal panels and in the eye holes that were the only features on an otherwise blank face. It was not a great climber, but Gary's almost gold-rank strength was able to haul the six ton golem with no more concern than if whatever it was on would hold it. In many cases, the golem went through, rather than over obstacles.

Gary and the other craftspeople were all volunteers looking to help with the evacuation. Their powers were more effective than the average adventurers for dealing with widespread destruction. They could meld stone, reinforce buildings in danger of collapsing and use other techniques to extract any survivors who had become trapped. The support team of bronze-rank adventurers with them were assigned by the Adventure Society, having powers well-suited to getting the rescued civilians to safety once free from whatever had them trapped. Most had vehicle or speed powers, but the Adventure Society had even managed to spare a portal user and a healer.

The healer was especially useful with the thick dust that tightening the lungs of the normal-rankers they found. Children were especially vulnerable, often unconscious until subjected to a healing or cleanse ability. Luckily, low-rankers were not taxing on a bronze-rank healer's mana reserves.

The group had little time to spare. Once the messengers and their summoned monster army broke through, there would be no safe evacuation of civilians through the streets. Waiting out the rest of the attack buried where they were was a far from great option, especially for those with injuries, but the open streets would not be safe.

It was already proving dangerous even before the dome was broken through. Twice Gary's group had encountered naga, which were people with the upper body of an elf and the lower body of a serpent. These were lesser beings created by the serpent-spawning apocalypse beast the eagle-headed garuda was fighting. Fortunately, the freshly created beings had been disoriented by their coming into being. He guessed that was why they'd wandered off. One had been bronze and another silver, which Gary had easily dispatched, but he dreaded meeting a gold.

At this point, the streets were mostly clear of civilians not in need of rescue, as they had already evacuated to the bunkers. The bunkers were designed to withstand monster attacks and the civilians had been drilled in swiftly heading to them when anything threatened to get past the walls. This usually meant monsters manifesting inside the city, but soon after the monster surge, those drills were fresh in everyone's mind. With magical assistance to organise everything, evacuating the populace into the bunkers had gone smoothly in most of the city.

The place this wasn't true was the centre of the city. Groups like Gary's were risking extreme danger to rescue people trapped in fallen buildings or cut off by blocked streets. What should have been easy terrain had turned harsh and was getting worse by the moment as debris rained from the sky. Anything from loose rubble to the better part of entire buildings were leaving massive craters or blocking off entire streets.

More than once, Gary had to interpose himself to shield another craftsperson, getting hammered into the ground for his trouble. After each instance he had needed a healing potion and to conjure a fresh shield. As they moved, they saw many people who had been struck down while attempting to escape.

Gary and his group reached the next building where they sensed the auras of trapped survivors and went to work. Gary had the hammer, iron, fire and forge essences. His powers were better suited to smithing weapons than reinforcing buildings, but fortunately had experience to draw on. In the years leading up to the monster surge, Gary had spent

time moving between isolated towns, helping them prepare. Not only had he supplied them with weapons but worked on reinforcing walls and other defensive infrastructure.

The craftspeople shaped stone, reinforced structures and opened up pathways to dig out trapped people. These were people either too low-rank to escape themselves or people trapped with low-rankers. A silver-ranker pushing their own way out could easily cause a shift in debris that killed the people with them. Sadly, Gary had already encountered some who had made that mistake.

Each situation required its own adaptation to the specific conditions, testing the creativity of the craftspeople. As they went from rescue to rescue, they discovered which approaches worked best in most circumstances, refining their use each time. A common tactic was for a tunnel into a fallen building to be stone-shaped into place. The two-piece chest plate of Gary's forge golem then opened up to spray a layer of molten metal across the surface in a surprisingly well-controlled stream. A water-user then cooled the molten metal to reinforce the tunnel.

The silver-rank conjured metal was thin but strong, and while it would vanish along with the golem in time, it was more than enough to evacuate whoever was at the end of the new tunnel. Rough and ready construction was the order of the day at every site as jury-rigged girders and iron walls only had to hold long enough to get trapped civilians out.

The group realised their time was up from the hum of the barrier dome. A constant drone behind the crashes of debris and thunderous sounds of diamond-rank combatants, it had been consistently rising in pitch. Once the hum started to pulse, they knew the breach was about to happen. Gary looked up but couldn't see more than a hazy blue through the dust.

"Time to get to the bunkers ourselves," he declared, his tone brooking no dissent.

As a group they headed for the nearest bunker. It wasn't too far as the city centre had a number of them. In normal conditions, a silver-ranker on foot would reach one in minutes, if not seconds, but conditions were far from normal. The terrain was one thing, but in short order, they heard sounds in the air that were something between electrical discharges and breaking glass. They couldn't see it, but they knew the barrier had been breached.

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Jason and his team had managed to reach the sky over the entertainment district just in time to see the breach occur. The breaches were centred over the bunkers, so the team had a clear view as the barrier dome rippled like water. The rippling magic energy shifted from blue to clear as monsters pushed against it, but then suddenly pulled back.

The summoned creatures moved aside from the other side of the dome and a messenger gathered energy over his head, arms raised. It formed an orange, red and yellow ball, glowing like a sun, the colours plain through the now-clear section of barrier. Other messengers fed streams of power into it as it slowly grew larger.

Jason and his team watched and waited, and were far from alone in doing so. The air was not as thick with adventurers as the other side of the barrier was with monsters, but it was far from empty. Many teams hovered in the air, in vehicles and on personal flight devices. More adventurers were on the rooftops far below, waiting to protect the bunker beneath the ground.

There was a moment of stillness on both sides of the barrier dome. It was not quiet, with the distant thunder of diamond-rank battle, but the air was thick with tension. The fireball grew larger than the messenger creating it, until it was finally unleashed.

The flaming sphere did not rush forward, moving slowly towards the barrier dome. It struck the clear, rippling section of the barrier, which went hard like glass. It then shattered, the sound not quite like glass and with a sharp electric crash. A jagged hole appeared in the barrier, but it did absorb all the power from the fireball before breaking. Fragments of brittle magic, temporarily made solid, fell a short distance before dissolving into nothing.

Monsters poured through the breach like pressurised water through a sudden leak. The summoned creatures were all bizarre flying entities, moving through the air and firing projectiles or swooping to the attack. A one-eyed griffin with four wings that looked freakishly like human arms dove in to the attack with lion-like forelimbs and eagle talon hind legs. A large uncut crystal, purple and floating in the air, was orbited by magic sigils carved from what looked like rubies and sapphires. The sigils conjured rings of flame and razor-sharp circles of ice that were shot at the adventurers the monsters were bearing down on.

Like all the others, Jason's team moved forward to meet them. Humphrey and Sophie launched out of Onslow's shell, while Rufus stepped off and dropped down. Jason stepped into Shade and vanished. As soon as they were gone, a shimmering wall of air swirled around the shell. Onslow could use various elemental powers by activating the glowing runes on the segments of his shell, and as of silver-rank, Clive could enhance them. He was using ritual magic to enhance the wind shield as Belinda, dressed in a robe and pointy hat, was shooting blasts of magic from her staff and wand. Neil was taking stock of the battleground forming in the sky, saving his mana for when his team needed it.

Along with Onslow, Belinda and Humphrey's familiars were at the ready. Stash was currently retaining his puppy form as it allowed him to stay out of the way. His task was to guard the shell and its occupants and he would shapeshift as and when needed. Belinda's astral lantern, Glimmer, was pumping out mana to the team. Given that the battle would be a long one, that would pay off more and more the longer the conflict continued. Her other familiar, Gemini, was a blurry replica of Clive. It was better at replicating abilities than before, now that it was silver rank, and shared Belinda's knack for doing more of the best thing anyone else was up to.

The team was variously ready and waiting or already on the move. The Battle of Yareh had begun.

## Chapter 677

### Gary Goes To Work

Breaches to the barrier were happening all across the city, but one was unlike any of the others. Seen and heard from across the city, the messenger's only diamond ranker came down through the peak of the dome like an anvil through glass. The dome being penetrated released sound that reached the outer walls and force that shattered windows for kilometres. Adventurers were avoiding the central part of the city because of the ongoing garuda battle, but even at a distance many flyers were knocked out of the sky.

For most of the city's adventurers, the highest-level conflicts were more like a fireworks show than a battle they were participating in. Distant explosions made for a spectacular view, but getting to close held nothing but danger. Jason and his team paid minimal attention, trusting the city's own diamond-rank defenders to intercept. All they could do was hope that the city wasn't levelled in the process.

The high-level fights were mercifully out of reach of Jason's team in the entertainment district, and they had more than enough to be going on with. Enemies gushed through the local breach like water through cracks in a dam, mostly monsters but with a solid contingent of messengers. The adventurers outnumbered the messengers, but the monsters were a countless swarm.

No one on the field was lower than silver rank. While both sides had gold rankers, Jason was relieved to see that the adventures had a slim advantage in that regard. None of the monsters were gold rank, only messengers. His aura senses told him that the most powerful combatant was on the other side, however. Auras were far from a perfect measure of power, but Jason's instincts warned him about one of the messengers.

It was the man who had conjured the fireball that breached the barrier. His skin was light brown and his hair dark. He wore light leather armour, but any protection at all was rare amongst the messengers, as if to admit the need was to show weakness. The man's wings were shades of brown and grey, more like a bird than an angel.

Both sides were led by their gold rankers, although very little in the way of orders were going out. Summoned monsters swarmed down towards the adventurers defending on the ground, while the ones in the air thinned them out as best they could. The messengers sought to impede the adventurers as much as they could, with the gold-rank battles especially settling into a *détente*.

The gold-rankers of one side could swiftly decimate the other if they weren't forced to negate one another. It was a tense conflict that no smart silver-rank went anywhere near,

largely taking place in the higher reaches of the battle. At the low end, the advantage of flight the summons had against many ground defenders was ameliorated by their goal. If the monsters couldn't dig down to the bunker they had failed, so they were forced to come to the defenders. The result was a massacre, although not without casualties on the side of the adventurers. No matter how many monsters fell, however, there was always more pouring down.

Jason's team went to work, sticking to Humphrey's outlined strategy. Belinda and Clive made use of the rituals Clive had set up inside Onslow's shell that enhanced the beams and blasts coming from their magical staves and wands. Arrays of nested ritual diagrams were very hard to integrate without them interfering with one another, but Clive had spent much of the past few years perfecting the unusual practice of combat rituals.

Clive had been well aware that while he was a utility asset to the team, he was the least member when it came to combat. He had a few support abilities and one very powerful attack spell, but he often found himself feeling more like an auxiliary member than a full one. As such, he had spent much of the time Jason was absent working to improve his combat effectiveness.

He was never going to match Humphrey, Sophie and Jason, who were the combat mainstays. Belinda's versatility meant that she was always filling a gap, disabling enemies or making a team member even better than they already were. As for Neil, his value as healer was obvious. Clive couldn't change his powers and he was never going to be a solo combat star, so instead of trying to expend his abilities, he narrowed them.

Clive had long used combat rituals to enhance his effectiveness, largely inspired by his acquisition of very powerful staff and wand weapons. Combat rituals were largely looked down on by adventurers and magical researchers alike, but Clive was determined to take them as far they could be taken. The result was a collections of rituals that could be nested in tight arrays, turning a largely ignorable beam attack from his staff into an attack that rivalled an essence ability.

The result of Clive's efforts was that he and his familiar had become a turret bunker, pouring out attacks that ravaged the summoned monsters. At the same time, it was efficient enough that the barrage could be maintained for hours. Clive had mana enough to spare that he could feed extra to Onslow, resetting and enhancing the familiar's magic powers. As for any monsters that tried to assault them, Onslow's elemental powers could fend off any but the most concentrated assaults. While it took some preparation time, Clive finally felt that he could contribute to battle without absolutely needing the support of the team.



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Gary's group of craftspeople and low-rank adventurers made their way through a city that looked like it was going through the apocalypse. Thunder pealed, not from storms but from the battle of behemoths only vaguely visible through the choking dust. Stones from the size of a fist to the size of a house fell from the sky at random, meaning that the sky had to be watched at all times.

The biggest problem facing the group was that their destination, a bunker, was the same place the messengers were targeting the breaches. The craftspeople and their adventurer support team hurried through the city, picking up straggling civilians as they went. Fortunately this didn't slow them too much as the adventurers were all chosen for their ability to hasten others. One sped up their movement speed, while another had a pack of rideable lizard familiars. One adventurer picked more civilians up and carried them telekinetically.

It did not take long from hearing the barrier broken open before the monsters found them. Gary knew that he would not be able to shield the civilians and bronze-rankers against the summoned creatures. They were all silver-rank and he was the only real combatant, so he would need to take the fight to the monsters. The other craftspeople were of at least some help, conjuring ice barriers and water shields or raising up walls of earth. They even managed to fight back, shooting obsidian spears and other projectiles, but they were not fighters.

Under Gary's direction, they strove to keep moving rather than secure kills. Any monster that wanted to slink back into the sky, Gary was happy to let go. The group sustained injuries and lost a couple of civilians to a monster that fired sonic blasts. That one was left struggling to fly back into the sky, weighed down with a coating of molten metal.

Gary's senses told him that the whole city had become a war zone as adventurers, messengers and monsters clashed. Hard-hit streets became even worse as powers flew off in every direction, tearing up pavement and hammering buildings. Scattered civilians too slow or stubborn to reach a shelter were pummelled by stray magic or collapsing buildings.

Despite losing a couple of civilians, the group was largely optimistic as they drew close to the bunker. The craftspeople had done a surprisingly good job of deterring the monsters, even if they mostly escaped alive. Gary was about to warn the group to be wary as they rounded the next corner when an aura emerged from the throng of monsters that stood out from the others.

A messenger flew around a building and descended to float just above the ground in front of them. Gary could sense he was of the summoner type from the way his aura interacted with the monsters in the area. He was slightly taller than even Gary's height. Beautiful, with golden hair and pale skin, his sculpted body delicately draped in loose clothes of white and gold. His bare feet floated just over the flagstone street, the pristine white wings spread out behind him undulating softly. The dust that was clinging in Gary's fur and on his armour did not touch the messenger, as if afraid to soil it.

Gary knew that the messenger being only a silver-ranker did not mean their numbers were an advantage. He was certain the summoner could call on the monsters with swiftness, and probably even boost their power. Even if he could seize the momentum before the summons were brought into play, messengers were no joke to fight alone.

"I have sensed you driving off my creatures," the messenger told them, his voice a melody of the heavens. "That will end here."

There was almost pity in the messenger's voice, Gary's hackles raising as the beautiful man looked down on them. The messenger looked at him and smiled, then pushed out with his aura. Despite being one man, he suppressed the silver-rank craftspeople who had never trained their auras for combat. The messenger's aura was unlike anything they had encountered, a brutal and almost physical force. Compared to delicate appearance of the messenger, his aura was that of a savage thug.

Only Gary's aura held strong, the benefits of training with Jason. Jason's aura was even worse than this man's, with many of the same traits yet even more oppressive. Jason had been ruthless in training his companions to resist aura suppression, and none of them shirked. They all knew how dangerous auras could be.

The others in Gary's group did not fare as well. The civilians collapsed outright, one of them going into a seizure but Gary had neither the time nor the power to help them. The bronze-rankers and the craftspeople fared about the same, the adventurers better trained while the craftspeople were stronger. They all turned pale as their auras shrank like mice under the gaze of a hawk.

Gary's aura wasn't suppressed, but he was definitely outmatched, even when the messenger was simultaneously suppressing the others. It wavered but held, trembling under the strain. Many of the others had dropped to one or both knees under pressure that was spiritual rather than physical. Gary squared himself, planting his feet. His right hand held his hammer, the head glowing red-yellow with heat. His armour and shield did the same, glowing between plates of dark metal. His head was bare, having not conjured his helmet so as to not restrict his line of sight on the sky.

The messenger looked at Gary with surprise, as if at a pet that had demonstrated an unexpected trick. He floated forward, stopping directly in front of Gary.

“Kneel, savage, and you shall live. Serve me, and I shall even spare these... people... out of respect for your value as a slave.”

Gary grinned defiance through lion’s teeth. What he’d heard about the arrogance of messengers had proven true, as had the fact that it could lead them to make tactically unsound choices.

“You want savage?” he growled.

Gary’s roar hit the messenger like a cannon, the pure sonic force of it shooting the messenger back faster than the bronze-rankers could even track. The messengers smashed through the wall of the building it had come around to confront the group, while the building itself was covered in spiderweb cracks.

“Pull it out,” Gary snarled and the foundry golem at the rear of the group opened its chest cavity. Glowing hot chains shot out of the golem and into the hole made by the messenger entering the building. They stopped for a moment and then started pulling back rapidly.

The only light they could see through the hole was the glow of the chains which were wrapped around something in the dark. They hauled it out with industrial inevitability as the chains went back into the chest cavity of the golem. The messenger became visible as he reached the hole, looking far less untouchable. He was caked with dust and grime now, sear marks burnt black into white wings where the chains were binding them.

The messenger did not allow itself to just be dragged along, ignoring the sizzle from his hands as he gripped the chains. He twisted himself as he was dragged, planting his feet at the edge of the hole and hauling back against the golem. For a moment, his movement was arrested as he struggled for control.

Gary was standing next to the chains, extending from the golem behind him. He tossed his hammer casually in the air, grabbed one of the chains and yanked, sending the messenger hurtling in his direction. Even bound the messenger’s wings managed to turn his tumble in the air into a glide, but it came to an unceremonious end before he could arrest his momentum. Gary snatched his hammer out of the air and brought it down, smashing the messenger into the ground.

The winged man’s face had hit hard enough to crack a flagstone, but Gary was far from done. He grabbed a wing and flipped the messenger like a steak. He felt the beleaguered man’s aura reaching for the monsters nearby and distracted him with a hammer to the face. The shield dropped from Gary’s arm, pinning the messenger’s chest

and arms when Gary planted a foot on it. His head visible, the messenger glared up at Gary as he tried to push him off, but Gary was intractable as a mountain.

Gary looked back at the people behind him, under his protection. His mind flashed to Farrah's death, when he could do nothing but watch helplessly as dimensional invaders killed her in front of him. He looked down at the messenger, gripped his hammer in both hands and went to work.

## Chapter 678

### The Lady Shooting Hurricanes at People

Belinda was mimicking Clive, blasting at summoned monsters with her own staff and wand, but she was a pale imitation of the real thing. She could also make use of Clive's rituals, boosting her weapons to deal more damage and chain their attacks from enemy to enemy. The problem was that her weapons were not able to make as much use of the rituals as Clive's were. Her staff and wand were both quality items, but if she let the rituals overcharge them as much as Clive did his, they would swiftly break down.

Clive's legendary-quality growth items were something he had discovered in an astral space and nothing available on the market could match them. They could take more punishment than ordinary weapons and were the crux of his combat effectiveness. Belinda didn't begrudge him such a key tool, but was feeling a little wasted as a second-rate imitation.

Watching how the monsters were moving, she looked for fresh options. Her power set was versatile, but didn't do well when coming into direct combat without time to prepare. If she had time to study the area, rig the terrain or at least lure enemies into a favourable environment, her charlatan and trap essences were incredible assets. When the fight was open and sudden, however, her effectiveness dropped. To have a real impact she had to get opportunistic, finding the right moments to make an unexpected move.

The monsters were pouring through the breach in the barrier dome, hundreds of metres above the ground. They immediately dropped towards their target, the bunker buried beneath the ground. Adventurers in the sky did their best to thin them out for the other adventurers at ground level, while the messengers sought to distract them, letting the monsters go through unimpeded.

Area attacks were the most valuable asset to the adventurers, given the circumstances. This was not her team's strong point, but they did have a few powers that had taken on area effects as they ranked up. The most spectacular was Sophie's wind blades, which were usually too slow for area attacks. She tended to use them at point-blank range, being a melee fighter, but she did get the occasional chance to truly unleash. With the monsters clustered so thickly together, it was shooting fish in a barrel.

Belinda watched as Sophie periodically shot her wind blades at the torrent of creatures descending through the sky. Her blades grew wider as they travelled, and for each enemy they hit, they triggered a secondary ring of cutting force. In normal

circumstances, most silver-rank monsters had the reflexes to dodge, but with a curtain of monsters falling from the sky it was harder to miss than to hit.

The results were incredibly destructive, but any individual power was trying to divert a river with a bucket. Only a lot more people with a lot more buckets would get the job done, and other adventuring teams were doing better jobs of widespread devastation. Team Storm Shredder was fighting nearby, demonstrating this as they made good on their name. Their core strategy was built around stacking buffs on powerful attacks, in this case electric arrows chaining from monster to monster. The result did look like a thunderstorm shredding monsters.

Their already impressive area attack powers were given a powerful and thematic boost by the inclusion of Zara Rimaros. She might have been adopted into another family with another names, but she lived up to her former title of Hurricane Princess as she unleashed localised storms of hurricane-force wind and water. Monsters were left battered, disoriented and soaking wet, set up for an electrical blast.

Even so, the monsters did not stop pouring in through the breach like beer from a keg. Truly clearing out the monsters would require the slow-but-extreme area attacks of affliction specialists. These were people with entire teams built around keeping them safe as their afflictions escalated in reach and power.

Jason and Rufus both had slow-burn affliction powers, but Rufus especially used them more as a platform to set up finishing moves on individual targets. His afflictions were used to charge up powerful attacks that could take down even silver-rank enemies, if there were enough weaker enemies to load up with afflictions. One-shotting a silver-ranker was something few could manage, even assassination specialists and gold rankers. As Rufus was no assassination specialist, the setup required was slow and required a small army of enemies to afflict so he could build power up from them. Even if he met these requirements, he had to roam amongst those enemies, which was always a dangerous proposition.

Belinda knew that Rufus was far below them, working on that at that very moment. Jason was somewhere in the middle of the enemy, starting the destructive butterfly chain that could, if it got up and running, rival some of the full-blown affliction specialists. If the butterflies weren't stopped from spreading early, they would eventually get way beyond anyone's ability to suppress.

That would take time, though, and that was in short supply as the monsters descended towards the ground and the bunker beneath it. Immediate area attacks were what would buy the affliction specialists time. Belinda's powers were all about using them

in the right context, and as she looked again at the descending monsters, that might be exactly what she needed. All she had to do was convince someone to do something very stupid.

“Hump,” she reached out through party chat. “I’m seeing a very solid opportunity to do some damage.”

“I take it that there’s a complication.” Humphrey said. He sounded perfectly calm, even though Belinda saw him carve a monster in half as he spoke. “I’m guessing you want me to do something very stupid. Also, don’t call me Hump.”

“You still have those floating discs I gave you, right?” she asked him.

“I do,” Humphrey said, his voice wary. “I don’t see how they would do you much good without them being right in amongst the monsters.”

“Very astute,” Belinda praised.

“Jason is better suited to diving in amongst the monsters,” Humphrey pointed out.

“Little busy,” Jason said, sounding strained even through voice chat.

“I could do it,” Sophie said as she kicked off a messenger’s back to go sailing through the air. The messenger turned and fired a thick beam of energy from its hands, striking Sophie square on. That turned out to be an after-image, the beam passing through and punching a hole through a summoned monster as Sophie appeared behind the messenger again, kicking him in the head.

“You need to keep anyone from focusing on Onslow,” Humphrey told her. “I’ll do Belinda’s madness run, but I’ll need some extra attention, Neil.”

“Don’t worry,” Neil assured him. “I’ll keep you alive.”

“I’d have preferred if you said you’d keep me safe,” Humphrey told him.

“I didn’t say safe,” Neil told him. “You can’t hold me to that.”

“See?” Belinda said. “You’ll be fine, probably.”

There was no response for a moment.

“Did you just make a grumbling sound and then realise you couldn’t figure out how to send it through voice chat?” Sophie asked.

“No,” Humphrey said unconvincingly.

“Oh, look out,” Sophie said. “Messengers high and right.”

The group’s attention turned to a trio of messengers that had taken notice of the Flying shell from which adventurers were safely spitting out attacks.

“How is that fair?” Clive complained. “Why aren’t they going after they lady shooting hurricanes at people?”

“I think you’ll find that some of them jumped her a while back,” Belinda said, pointing. Clive looked over to where Zara’s team was fending off a half-dozen messengers.

“Oh. I guess that is fair.”

Humphrey rocketed through the air to engage the three messengers moving in on Onslow’s shell. Even propelled by a special attack designed for rapid air strikes, however, he still arrived after Sophie. Her first two kicks landed on their heads before they even registered her presence, a perfectly timed distraction for Humphrey’s arrival. His Dive Bomb attack was a combination power, allowing him to link it with his Unstoppable Force ability and land a devastating hit. Combined with his ability to sacrifice life force to enhance his power, his massive sword blasted into all three like an explosion, sending them flying.

Despite being robbed of the initiative, the messengers were undaunted. One of them conjured scale armour stylised like feathers that covered him head to toe. Only magic giving the rigid armour flexibility made movement possible, as ordinary armour with the same design would have left the wearer unable to move.

The other messengers fell back behind their armoured companion, one conjuring a bow stylised like a wing. The other had feathers fly from her actual wings, turn to metal and combine to form a sword. Humphrey and Sophie ignored the defender, both teleporting behind the trio to engage the strikers. Humphrey dropped his heavy sword and conjured his lighter one, the messenger swordswoman in front of him frowning it at. Humphrey’s Razor Wing Sword power created a sword that looked a lot like a messenger’s wing, rendered in metal.

Sophie and Humphrey played out a dance in the air with the messengers as they manoeuvred for position, the defender trying to reposition himself to protect the others. Humphrey, with his conjured dragon wings, was the most awkward of the group. He swiftly found the armoured messenger interposed between himself and the others. Sophie was the opposite, a leaf on the wind with her flight power, Leaf on the Wind. She harried the two strikers simultaneously, especially the archer.

“You have strength and skill,” the armoured messenger told Humphrey, “but it will not be enough this day. Withdraw, wait out the battle, and you will live to see tomorrow.”

They hovered in the air facing one another. They both had wings out, but it was magic holding them aloft, not aerodynamics.

“But if I do that,” Humphrey told him. “Who will distract you three?”

“What?”

Sophie and Humphrey teleported away, just as a prismatic beam washed over the messengers.



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Clive stopped firing off his weapons and started gathering mana the moment Sophie warned them about the messengers.

“Set them up for a big hit, if you please.”

“Let us know when to get out of the way,” Sophie said through voice chat, already landing kicks on their heads. Jason’s party chat was useful for keeping contact through loud battles and across large distances, but it was also a powerful tool for silently communicating tactics. Humphrey and Sophie held the messenger’s attention while Clive charged up his strongest offensive ability.

- 
- You are preparing to cast [Wrath of the Magister]. Select the variant you wish to cast.
  - Variant one: [Prismatic Affliction].
  - Variant two: [Prismatic Void].
  - Variant three: [Spell & Weapon Enhancement Ritual]. This variant is already in place. Multiple effects do not stack but additional casts may be used to cover additional areas.

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“Jason,” Clive said into party chat as he looked at the system box, “I am so glad to have you back.”

“Still busy,” Jason said. “I hope these guys have seen my powers before, because otherwise they researched me personally.”

“Are you alright?” Clive asked him.

“Yeah no worries. I just need to—”

“Jason?”

“Can’t really talk. Stitch this, you birdman-rally-looking mother fu—”

Jason cut off his chat channel mid-sentence.

Clive turned his attention back to the spell he was gathering mana for. It was the slowest ability in his arsenal by far, but the payoff was commensurately impressive. It was one of the unconventional powers, usually belonging to spellcasters, that offered variations of the ability to choose from with each use. At lower ranks, the void variant had been a mana-intense trump card that could kill anything at bronze-rank that would stand still long enough to charge up the spell. Now that the enemies were silver, Clive found more value in the debilitating effects of the affliction’s variant.

- 
- You have selected the [Prismatic Affliction] variant of [Wrath of the Magister]. Select any or all of the following colour effects, with each colour additional mana costs:

- [Red] (high mana): Target's temperature is significantly increased (high-damage frost burn if combined with blue).
- [Yellow] (high mana): Target's abilities have increased mana cost.
- [Pink] (moderate mana): Target's resistances are reduced.
- [Green] (moderate mana): Target's blood is poisonous to itself.
- [Purple] (very high mana): Expending mana harms the target.
- [Orange] (very high mana): Target suffers increased damage from all sources.
- [Blue] (high mana): Target's temperature is significantly decreased (high-damage frost burn if combined with red).

---

Although it was the early stage of the battle, Clive didn't hold back.

- 
- You have selected all colours. Total mana cost has increased to beyond extreme.

---

Clive had a larger mana pool than normal, courtesy of a blessing from a great astral being. It had triggered a human gift evolution, turning the normal human affinity for special attacks into one for spells. Combined with his ability to accelerate mana recovery and burn health for mana, Clive was built for big, expensive spells.

Clive warned Sophie and Humphrey at the last moment and did not wait for them before unleashing the spell. Silver-rankers had lightning reflexes and he didn't want to miss, trusting his teammates to get out of the way.

From where he stood at the edge of Onslow's shell shelter, a prismatic beam as wide as the shell itself blasted from Clive's outstretched hands, blasting over and past the messengers. Clive had deliberately aimed to avoid any adventurers, but the beam washed through the throng of summoned monsters behind them.

Humphrey and Sophie dove back in, pouncing on the now severely debilitated messengers, Belinda and Clive backing them up with ranged attacks.

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The two strikers fell, mostly from Humphrey's attacks. He burned life force to inflict massive spikes of damage, Neil restoring it with healing magic. It was too early in the battle for Sophie to kill quickly, not having built up her magical buffs, so she focused on preventing the withdrawal the savaged messengers were clearly attempting to make. Even so, the defender managed to escape into the summoned monsters. Sophie started to chase them but Humphrey called her back.

"We dropped two of them," he told her. "Keep the victory rather than chasing defeat. No good will come of diving into all those summoned monsters."

"Speaking of which," Belinda told him, "can we get back to our conversation about you diving into all those summoned monsters?"



## Chapter 679

### Humphrey's New Normal

Clive looked over at the breach in between blasting at monsters with his staff and wand.

"They must have summoners stationed outside, sending more in as we kill these ones."

"I'd say a lot of summoners," Belinda agreed. "I know their summoners can call up more than even Humphrey, but these numbers are beyond anything they told us to expect. Which means we could really use *someone* diving in there to help me use my power effectively."

"Yes, I'm going," Humphrey grumbled through voice chat.

"Have you got the discs?" she asked him.

"Yes, I still have the discs."

"Did you pack a lunch?"

Humphrey's sword claimed the last head of a monster that looked like conjoined tripled carved out of marble, with three wings at equidistant points around its body. It didn't look like it could function, let alone fight, but it was more intelligent than most monsters and could use a handful of spells. Humphrey had charged at it through a rain of projectiles, his mana crystals absorbing some and the others blasting his armour with elemental attacks of fire, ice and lightning. Once he got within arm's reach it was a short fight.

"If you're ready, I'm just going to go," Humphrey told Belinda. "You alright with that, Neil?"

"I'm ready," Neil confirmed.

Humphrey plunged into the torrent of monsters spilling in through the breach and dropping like a waterfall towards the ground. He cleared a path as best he could with his fire breath and swept enemies away with his massive dragon-wing sword. Neil's shields snapped into place every time they came off cooldown, but attacks still rained down on Humphrey's dragon armour.

Neil was a skilled adventurer, but in a very different way to Sophie. He had two quick-use shields that were his most commonly deployed abilities. They were short-lived but exceptionally effective when timed correctly. Neil's skill was not demonstrated in martial or acrobatic prowess but in situational awareness, judgement and timing. Knowing when to use an ability and when to hold it for a few seconds later. Reading the fight to predict what

his teammates would face. Understanding exactly what his companions could and could not endure.

Neil's quick-shield abilities both had cooldowns of twenty seconds, with one being more tactical and the other focused entirely on protection. The tactical power, Burst Shield blasted away enemies that attacked the barrier. It could be used to give the recipient respite from attack, room to manoeuvre or the opportunity to make a counter-strike. This shield was useful as Humphrey was swarmed with enemies, but the protective shield was more critical.

---

#### Ability: [Absorbing Shield] (Shield)

- Special ability (recovery, retribution, drain).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 20 seconds.
  
- Current rank: Silver 4 (07%).
  
- Effect (iron): Create a short-lived shield that negates an incoming attack and generates mana-over-time with a strength that scales with the amount of damage negated. High-damage attacks of gold-rank or higher may not be entirely negated.
  
- Effect (bronze): Attacks made against the shield drain health and mana from the attacker and bestow it upon the recipient of the shield.
  
- Effect (silver): The recipient gains [Priority Ward].
  
- [Priority Ward] (boon, magic, stacking): When [Absorbing Shield] is used on a target with this boon, the cooldown is reduced by one second for each instance of [Priority Ward]. Additional instances of this boon may be accumulated.

---

Absorbing shield not only protected but even had some healing and recovery effects. Most importantly, repeated uses meant the short-lived shield could be used on closer and closer intervals. The counterbalance to this was the high mana cost, which could rapidly stack up with sequential uses.

Belinda and Clive's auras both reduced the mana cost of the team's abilities, and Clive's replenished mana at the same time. Even so, Neil was swiftly burning through mana as he cast Absorbing Shield over and over.

"Clive," Neil said as he threw the absorbing shield on Humphrey again. He could barely see Humphrey through the throng of monsters to put the shield up. "Humphrey is taking a pounding out there and I'm going through a lot of mana to keep him up. I'm going to need a tide."

"If I use Mana Tide now, that's it for the fight unless Belinda uses her reset on it."

“If I don’t get some more mana,” Neil told him, “that’s it for Humphrey.”

“Alright,” Clive agreed, pausing from his attacks to cast a spell.

*“Let the astral tides bestow their bounty on the chosen.”*

---

#### Ability: [Mana Tide] (Balance)

- Special ability (recovery).
- Cost: low mana.
- Cooldown: 20 seconds.
  
- Current rank: Silver 4 (02%).
  
- Effect (iron): Draw mana from the astral to replenish allies. Mana recovery begins slowly and escalates over time. Local dimensional conditions may impact the rate of recovery.
  
- Effect (bronze): Allies affected by this ability increase their mana recovery by spending mana. The more mana spent, the greater the recovery increase. Abnormal local dimensional conditions may produce positive or negative side effects.
  
- Effect (silver): When allies affected by this ability use powers that cost mana, the effect of those abilities is enhanced. Enhanced abilities will be affected by environmental factors.

---

Mana started trickling into the team, over a widespread enough area that even Jason as Rufus were affected. The trickle grew swiftly as the dimensional membrane between the universe and the astral was still thin and patchy following the monster surge.

Neil continued tossing Absorbing Shields on Humphrey, finding that they were lasting longer than they should. Mana Tide caused abilities to be impacted by the environment, such as ice spells being stronger in the cold or fire spells stronger in the desert. To Neil’s delight, the city barrier, throwing off loose energy from where it was breached, seemed to be boosting his shields.

The rest of the teams started opening up with their strongest abilities, so as not to waste the extra mana. Belinda was waiting for her opportunity, which came as Humphrey emerged from amongst the monsters, job done. He crash-landed inside the shell, bloody and bedraggled despite Neil’s best efforts. His rigid dragon-scale armour was shredded, draping off him like rags. It was clear that he had been chum in the water to that many monsters without the elusiveness of Sophie, Rufus or Jason.

What Humphrey had been doing amongst the monsters was deploying small discs, looping through the horde and leaving them behind like breadcrumbs. The palm-sized objects were unremarkable, with barely enough magic to float in place. Humphrey had left

a trail of them behind, and while a handful were destroyed by the monsters, most were ignored. The orders of their summoners to reach the ground and dig through to the bunker were more important than a few small, unthreatening devices.

As Neil healed Humphrey, who was conjuring a fresh set of armour, Belinda's attention was on the discs. She had crafted them personally with cheap and easy magic, looking for something unremarkable and inexpensive as she wouldn't be getting them back.

Very expensive was the looking glass that allowed her to spy on her discs from a moderate distance and, more importantly, allow her to use her abilities on them. It was a simple device, the range was fairly short and only worked on two of her abilities. Even so, the price for devices that would break the line-of-sight limit that most abilities had was always a costly proposition, and in more ways than one. Such items required an intrinsic link to the user, meaning that if someone hostile got a hold of them, they had grasped a dangerous vulnerability.

The looking glass wasn't actually glass but a hoop of moon silver, threaded with sun gold. The image that appeared as she activated it was an illusion it produced of the closest disc. Extending her power through the hoop, Belinda used her Lightning Tether power. A rod rose up from the disc and an arc of electricity jumped to the nearest monster. The arc stayed in place as another arc jumped from that monster to another, repeating in a chain until seven monsters were linked.

The nature of the power was to inflict very little damage close to the rod, little more than a static shock. The further the targets moved from the rod, however, the larger the damage from the lightning arcs linking them together. Further, the arcs would fire off electricity at other nearby enemies. Given that the monsters were hurtling towards the ground at breakneck speed, the damage swiftly became immense. As myriad arcs of electricity crackled and seared through the monsters, from the outside, it looked like a waterfall of lighting.

Such a spectacular display quickly drew attention. The monsters avoided the lightning and the rod to which it was tethered, although they were so tightly packed there was only so far they could go. The messengers did not avoid it, recognising it as a threat. One of them acted to put a stop to the ability, shooting a razor-sharp feather from a safe distance. Weaving through the monsters, the feather struck the lightning rod, which immediately detonated in an explosion of electricity and force. Even having given the rod distance, the radius was large enough that many monsters were severely burned. There

were no immediate fatalities, but some lost the ability to fly, be it through scorched wings or electrical paralysis.

Belinda shifted her looking glass to another disc and called up another rod.

\*\*\*

Belinda went through all the discs left by Humphrey that hadn't been taken out by monsters before she got to them. By the time she was done, the team had once again drawn the attention of the messengers. They had been left alone for a time after killing two and driving off a third, but after Belinda's lightning waterfalls, their interest was renewed. Fortunately, they were mostly still focused on the big areas attackers like Zara and some of the local guild teams. The most they did, for the moment, was redirect more of the monsters to attack the team. It was only a tiny fragment of the numbers still continuing down, but it was enough to put the team under real pressure.

Humphrey had fully recovered, while Belinda worked her magic. With a few healing spells, freshly conjured armour and a quick splash of crystal wash, he was once again looking like the imposing team leader. After getting tossed around by the monsters when he went to them, he was looking to even the score now that they were coming to him. He was going to show them what he could really do, force more messengers to show up themselves and then kill them too.

Humphrey flew around on his conjured wings, the mana drain of doing so reduced by one of the many expensive items he possessed. One of the benefits of coming from a wealthy and connected adventuring family was the ability to source the perfect items, making him the best-gearred member of the team. He used his connections to help the others, but nothing could match the efforts Danielle Geller spent on equipping her children.

Humphrey had struggled on first reaching silver rank. At iron and bronze, the power of his attacks was overwhelming, butchering all but the sturdiest of monsters in a few blows. His strongest attacks could wipe out multiple targets at once. Silver rank was the threshold at which the resilience of bodies, especially those of monsters, outstripped even the strongest of attacks. One hit kills became a thing of the past and Humphrey had needed to shirk some bad habits.

It was a lifetime of training, plus his dedication and experience that helped him push past his initial problems and find his new normal at silver rank. He did so by taking the opposite approach to the rest of his team which, as a whole, specialised in fighting the least common and most exotic enemies. Humphrey doubled-down on his role as the team's anchor, bringing a conventional speed and power approach that was a foundation for many of the team's strategies.



Adventuring at silver rank was a different proposition than what came before. Many adventurers in high-magic zones never saw an unsupervised contract before silver-rank. Most monster encounters fell into three categories, being swarms of weaker monsters, packs of balanced monsters, and the most powerful monsters, spawning alone or in pairs.

At lower ranks, the powerful monsters were the most dangerous, with the strongest bronze-rank monsters outstripping many of the weaker silvers. The difference only really mattered to bronze-rank adventurers who had to be wary of the damage reduction and resistance bonuses that came with rank disparity.

At silver-rank, the solitary monsters were no longer the key threat. With even weak monsters being startlingly resilient, the standard shifted away from the once invincible attacks that had cleared out monsters like sweeping a dirty floor. A good team could leverage their numbers to gang up on one or two targets effectively, or use superior strength to clear out weaker monsters, even if they were tougher than before. Although their team makeup was rather unusual, Humphrey and his team were not so bizarre as to escape that dynamic.

The most dangerous monsters then, were those too numerous to gang up on, yet too tough to be handled quickly. This was the dynamic that Humphrey had prepared himself for. He might not slay every monster with a single sweep of his sword anymore, but he still hit harder than most adventurers, and could move around quickly while doing it. With potent, unrelenting attacks, supplemented by a moderate amount of area damage, he was a square peg in a square hole when it came to the most common and dangerous of monsters.

Humphrey was perfectly suited to the level of power displayed by the monsters summoned by the messengers. The messengers used middle-ground monsters exclusively, but had somehow managed them in massive numbers, making it the worst of all worlds. With extra monsters now focused on Onslow's shell as the team's primary platform, Humphrey got busy.

## 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.

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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.

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### 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.

- 
- 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.