

## Chapter 681

### The Difference in Conviction

Humphrey's second foray into the main force of the summons was markedly different from the first. His Relentless Assault attack has reached such levels of power that his silver-rank sword was breaking apart every dozen or so strikes, the forces passing through it too much for it to endure. It didn't stop Humphrey as he didn't miss a beat, conjuring the sword anew each time and continuing his assault. Every swing of his blade left a monster debilitated or dead, the toughest finding half their body turned into scattered chunks. The weaker ones were reduced to a fine mist, drifting on the air.

While Humphrey was revelling in a level of power he had never imagined, he was fully cognizant that it was a fleeting moment, one that would pass sooner rather than later. Clive's Mana Tide had reached peak output as the spell's duration drew close to the end, while Neil's buff was not a long-term one, even with the duration extended. Most of all, Humphrey had maintained his Relentless Assault to the point that even with multiple significant mana sources and an expanded mana pool, it was becoming too expensive to sustain.

With each swing, a noticeable chunk of his mana pool was emptied. It was like nothing Humphrey had even experienced and he was feeling the strain. Something deeper than exhaustion of his stamina and mana, the meridians that were the pathways of magic in his body were becoming strained. Jason had an affliction that replicated this, making abilities more costly to use, but this was no attack. Humphrey had just overextended the magical matrix, the underlying framework that was the core of his body. All he needed was a good rest, but he wasn't ready to rest yet.

There was also something else, that Humphrey had heard of but never seen. There was so much power piled up on him, from potent boons to a constant influx of shields and healing. Most of all, it was Humphrey's attack. The build-up power was thankfully centred on the sword Humphrey kept swapping out because, like his swords, Humphrey was silver-rank. Even his tenuous connection to the magic of the attack, just enough to guide it, was leaving him shaky. If he was the main conduit, rather than the weapon, that much power would break him down. And unlike his sword, his body couldn't just be conjured fresh. That was more Jason's area.

The accumulated power of Humphrey's special attack had started to feel unstable to the point that others were notice more than just how much power it had built up.

“Humphrey,” Clive warned through voice chat, although the signal was patchy with so much magic around them. “If the magic comes close to triggering a backlash, just let it go. Silver-rank magic becomes extremely volatile if it reaches gold-rank and might do something?”

“Something?” Sophie asked.

“It’s magic,” Clive told her. “It’s inherently unpredictable. People like me work very hard to take small parts of it and make them predictable.”

“Tell that to Jason’s aura,” Neil said. “Humphrey’s like the Jason’s aura of hitting people right now.”

“You’re making my point,” Clive. “Look at how wrecked Jason always ends up after one of his stunts. Do you want to be lying around for three months? Do want to die? Because that’s kind of his thing, and not all of us come back from the dead recreationally.”

“It’s not a hobby,” Jason complained through voice chat. “That’s just something I tell people.”

“I thought you were busy,” Belinda said to him.

“I am, but I still have time to defend my...crap, no I don’t.”

He started yelling through voice chat.

“Stop eye-beaming my butterflies, you messenger prick! I’m going tear your head off, shove it up the other end and watch you eyebeam your own insides! Then I’m going to drag you over to that monster with the one antler sticking out of it’s forehead and... wait, *is* that an antler? That can’t be a... oh, that isn’t right. That is not right. Who summoned that? There might be kids watching this battle, you depraved pricks! Humphrey, this monster has a big, multi-pronged—”

Humphrey muted the chat channel with a thought as he kept fighting.

Sophie, like Humphrey, was deep inside the monster torrent. After the lengthy fighting they’d done, she had finally built up enough power to be a genuine threat, while being even more elusive and harder to kill than ever. She was no match for Humphrey’s power, but at that stage there was no match for Humphrey’s power at silver-rank.

She was pinballing between messengers, trying to disrupt them from controlling the summons. If she could break their concentration enough, it would buy the defenders much-needed time to thin the monsters out.

Neil, Belinda and Clive were still in Onslow’s shell, floating around the outer edge of the horde. Belinda had conjured a massive, flat metal plate, hooked onto the underside of Onslow’s shell. She had then cast her Pit of the Reaper ability on it, facing down. The ability created a pit that was not a hole but a dimensional space, which could be placed on

anything roughly level, even the surface of still water. Belinda's custom-conjured plate was a purpose-built surface, sized just right. Shadowy tentacles reached from the pit like a nightmare kraken, snatching anyone or anything that got too close to Onslow's shell and wasn't part of the team. The monsters quickly realised that too close was a significant radius as many of them were dragged into the darkness of the pit. Despite it being upside down, nothing dragged in fell back out, only tentacles re-emerging in search of fresh meat.

The rest of the team were far from idle. Neil was concentrating on Humphrey who, despite being so powerful Clive was worried he would explode, was still being hammered by monsters. He was throwing out shields and healing as fast as he could while dumping mana into his Reels of Fortune as fast as they would take it, trying not to waste the mana coming in from Clive's spell. He knew that once the Mana Tide was over, he would miss the near-infinite stream it had become.

Belinda's tentacle pit snatched monsters out of the sky and dragged them into the void where they suffered massive necrotic damage. Each time the duration ended, the pit spat out whatever was left of the monsters that had been dragged in. Some two thirds survived, at least until she cast the spell again and they were drawn back inside.

Even with the fake death kraken plucking monsters out of the sky, the sheer density of monsters meant that Onslow's shell came under constant barrage. Clive had used ritual magic to enhance the wind barrier surrounding the shell and powers launched from the glowing runes marked on it. Each one launched fire, lightning, a hailstorm or some other elemental power, the runes fading as each was expended to produce an attack. Clive constantly restored them with his own overflowing mana, allowing Onslow to keep up the barrage.

Belinda didn't just use her Pit of the Reaper spell, which she had no need to supervise. She used her two tether powers on the top of Onslow's shell, leaving the enemy with an unpleasant situation. Force Tether dragged enemies towards it, dealing damage to any that resisted. Those that managed to overcome its strength suffered the damage of that, along with an unhealthy dose of electricity from the Lightning Tether. Anyone who did escape took increasingly more severe electrical burns, the further they got from the tether rods planted on the shell.

Staying on the shell was not a valid option either, as that left them as sitting ducks for the dark tentacles looking to drag them into the pit. The monsters tried destroying the rods anchoring the tethers, which exploded with startling force. That was enough to inflict massive harm, and Belinda immediately created fresh tethers.

As for Belinda's familiars, her lantern had returned to her eyes, allowing Belinda to fire eyebeams at stray monsters between copying Clive's Wrath of the Magister spell, restoring her detonated tether rods or refreshing the Pit of the Reaper. Any gap periods she filled by simultaneously blasting bolts of force from her wand and beams from her staff and eyes.

Her echo spirit was also mimicking Clive's Wrath of the Magister. Unlike Belinda's copy, however, the familiar's version was more illusion than reality. It did inflict a respectable amount of force damage, but nothing compared to the real thing with its massive damage and debilitating effects. It looked real enough, though, even to magical senses. That force monsters and messengers alike to scatter out of its way.

Stash also moved into action, doing his best impression of Sophie. This meant imitating her speed by turning into a flitter drake which looked like something between a lizard and a hummingbird. It somehow took the worst aesthetic elements of both, turning into a grotesquery that somehow managed to look too small and too large at the same time. It had not endeared Stash to Sophie when he first used the form, explaining that it was the way he could be most like her.

The ugly form was hard to make out, however, as Stash did indeed move through the battlefield in a blur. He specifically went after the monsters that managed to avoid Belinda's defensive measures as they continued to harass Onslow's shell with attacks.

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The messenger, Marek Nior Vargas, absently blocked a projectile fired by a gold rank adventurer with his wing. His attention on the adventurer that had dived deep into the monster horde for the second time. He had grabbed Marek's interest the first time because the move had made no apparent sense. The man had escaped, a worthy enough feat, although the attempt had unsurprisingly left him beaten and bloodied, for what seemed like no result. Marek's confusion had lasted until the lines of lightning had started raining down into the horde, originating from points along the path the man had taken.

Marek did not fear a fool who overestimated himself and learned a brutal lesson. But a man with the conviction to take that kind of beating because who knew it was worth the risk was another prospect entirely. The conviction to get things done, and the wisdom to make sure the things getting done were the right, was something that Marek feared.

He had no interest in the attack on the city and whatever schemes the Voice of the Will was using it to enact. The people defending the city, by contrast, could not have cared more; to retreat was to abandon their homes and their families. Marek had seen time and again the flame that lit inside people, and how that flame became a forge producing

heroes and martyrs. The difference in conviction could easily be the deciding factor in the battle.

Marek was confident in his superiority over the servant races here, but he knew that passion and commitment could close that gap in the face of Marek's disinterest. If the defenders of Yaresh started throwing themselves at the enemy with truly reckless abandon, the tenor of the battle would change. Those willing to accept casualties for victory had a grim but powerful advantage, even if any victory they earned became a pyrrhic one.

Seeing the man plunge back into the descending torrent of monsters once again had Marek concerned. Strategic decisions were all well and good, but if the enemy was willing to go to lengths that he was not, then his part of the raid could be brought undone. Marek might not care about the success of his part in the mission, but neither would he ignore a threat. Marek focused his attention more directly onto the man and immediately realised that a threat was exactly who and what he was.

The sheer number and power of magical effects on the man had surpassed silver-rank power levels, to the point of bordering on outright volatile. It was rare for that kind of power escalation, but Marek had seen it a number of times. The result ended up going one of two ways.

If the magic got out of control, the results would annihilate a goodly part of the horde of summons, given the man's location within it. Of course, the man himself would die with them, but that might even be his purpose. But if he held on, any silver-ranker wielding that kind of power would be something to behold.

Marek looked on in wonder as he tore through the summons like a wildfire through dry grass. That his fellow messengers could see that display and remain convinced of their inherent superiority amazed him. Standing above all others took work. No one just stumbled arse-backward into the kind of power that let them stand at the peak of the cosmos.

Elsewhere in the battlefield, Jason sneezed.