

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 at it. 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.

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.

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- 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.

“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.

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- 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).
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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.
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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.

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?"

