

Chapter 693

Rigid Flaws

Clive was trapped in a dimensional space by the duelling power of a messenger. Until one of them was dead, neither was able to leave. The space was an empty void, the only object being a massive flat disc on which Clive was standing. The remains of his precious familiar, Onslow, lay at his feet.

Facing off against Clive was a spear-wielding messenger whose sneer had turned into a glare. He had lunged at Clive, only to discover the adventurer could use his staff for more than blasting force bolts.

Item: [Spell Lance of the Magister] (silver rank [growth], legendary)

The staff of an ancient sorcerer, this weapon is focused on priming enemies for a potent magical assault (weapon, staff).

- Requirements: The power to wield magical tools.
- Basic attack: Explosive disruptive-force bolt. Inflicts [Spell Impetus].
- Basic attack: Disruptive-force beam. Consumes mana. Sustaining the beam on a target periodically inflicts [Spell Impetus].
- Effect: Increase the mana consumption when casting a spell to increase the effect. Effect is further enhanced if wielding both [Spell Lance of the Magister] and [Magister's Tithe].
- Effect: Can be used as a focus for the unique ritual [Magister's Ballista]. This ritual is not possible without the staff.
- Effect: When used to strike an enemy in melee gain an instance of [Power of the War Magus].
- [Spell Impetus] (affliction, magic, stacking): All resistances are reduced. When the recipient suffers an offensive spell from someone wielding [Spell Lance of the Magister], all instances of [Spell impetus] are consumed to increase the effect of the spell.
- [Power of the War Magus] (magic, stacking): Gain a body-hugging barrier that resists damage. When a force bolt is fired from the staff, all instances are consumed to increase damage.

Clive didn't have the matching wand, Magister's Tithe, which had fallen from his grip when the gold-rank messenger smashed apart Onslow's shell. The silver-rank messenger

he now faced had trapped Clive before he could retrieve it. The messenger continued to glare at him, hefting his spear. A system window appeared, flickering on the verge of collapse.

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- Party leader [Jason Asano] has had all abilities negated.
 - Party has been disbanded.
 - Ability [Party Interface] has ended.
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The window blinked out of existence.

Humphrey stood with each foot pinning a wing as he drove the point of his sword down on the messenger's throat. The point of his stylised dragon wing sword was essentially blunt, so he had to ram it down over and over, committing decapitation by blunt object.

For most of the time Jason spent on Earth, Clive had adventured as a trio with Sophie and Humphrey. His powers were not suited to frontline combat, but without a full team to shield him, coming face-to-face with danger was inevitable. Clive's preferred solution was to pre-empt such situations with comprehensive planning, but even he acknowledged that it was impossible to be ready for everything.

Even if he had been willing to ignore this truth, Sophie and Humphrey were not. They drilled him on fighting up close and personal, where he was least comfortable. He would never choose to take the fight into melee, but he could hold his own far better than the messenger he faced had expected.

They moved around each other in a dance, the messenger's spear alternately jabbing, lunging and spinning. Clive moved through the patterns Sophie and Humphrey had drilled into him, the tips of his staff leaving trails of gold light behind them. They lingered in the air as the pair clashed, and soon the air was littered with golden streaks.

Clive's powers were far from ideal for this kind of fight, but he had a number that were strikingly effective. His Mana Shield power allowed him, as the name implied, to soak damage by draining mana from his fortunately enormous pool. It was a costly draw when under repeated attack, but the silver-rank effect at least included a mana drain field that leeched it from his enemies. With only one foe on hand, however, its efficiency was not the best in a duel.

His main source of replenishment was the silver-rank effect of the Blood Magic ability. The base effect was to trade health for mana, which was the opposite of his current

requirements. As of his last rank-up, though, he could turn other people's health into mana with a ranged drain attack. Every time his opponent was fool enough to give him some distance, Clive drained his mana in a bright blue stream.

The messenger quickly learned not to let Clive have any distance. Along with mana drains, Clive used each reprieve from melee to bolster himself with more spells. A few abilities from the balance and karma essences left Clive almost more trouble than he was worth to attack.

Rune Mantle inflicted random retaliatory effects, from explosive knock-back damage to strength-energating afflictions. Mantle of Retribution was more simple and direct, applying retribution damage in response to every attack. It wasn't only defensive powers, either, as any chance to cast was an opportunity for the Instant Karma spell. This was an attack spell that dealt damage to the target based on how much damage they recently inflicted themselves.

In the early stages of the fight, attacking Clive seemed pointless as he soaked all the damage and dealt more back. Even the special attacks that punched through Clive's Mana Shield were returned twice over, each one more powerfully than the original.

Ability: [Vengeance Mirror] (Karma)

- Special attack.
- Cost: Varies.
- Cooldown: Varies.

- Current rank: Silver 4 (01%).

- Effect (iron): Replicate the last spell or special attack used on you or an ally by an enemy within the last few moments. Cost and cooldown are the same as the replicated attack. You may still use this ability if the triggering effect was negated. The replicated ability functions at your rank, not the rank of the enemy that originally used it.

- Effect (bronze): You may use the replicated ability a second time.

- Effect (silver): The ability replicated has enhanced effects if used against the individual it was copied from.

Clive's close quarter's techniques were not built for extended use, however. They were designed to get him out of danger or to hold on until help arrived, neither of which was going to happen here. The messenger simply took Clive's hits and bulled through the retaliatory effects.

The messenger's powers leaned towards decent resilience and rapid healing, allowing him to eat the punishment and keep going. Clive, on the other hand, was heavily reliant on his mana pool. While it was far larger than a normal adventurer, it could hold up only so long when his Mana Shield was under constant barrage.

The main factor swinging the fight away from Clive's favour, however, was that the messenger was starting to read Clive's patterns. Clive may have been heavily drilled by Sophie and Humphrey, but even highly effective patterns were no match for experience, and many of Clive's patterns were ineffective, inefficient and seemed to make little sense.

The messenger was battered but healing fast, while Clive was increasingly just battered. More and more attacks were punching through his barrier as his mana ebbed, making his shield weaker. The messenger recognized that his enemy could no longer afford to copy his attacks and returned to throwing out powerful special attacks, his spear glowing and vibrating with power. Sensing his impending victory, the messenger started to gloat.

"You fight well for a spellcaster, human, but your skills are shallow. You cannot hide behind your magic shell forever."

Clive remained silent, just as he had since tossing out the recording crystal. If the messenger wanted to gloat, that was fine. All the more pride to strip away, and better than wonder why Clive's fighting technique had so many fixed patterns and rigid flaws. The two continued to dance through air now thick with the golden lines still being left behind by Clive's staff.

The messenger had realised the floating, glowing lines were harmless and that Clive was trying to use them to bait him onto Rune Traps. The messenger was too attentive, however, and ignored the golden lights as he watched carefully for the traps. He even remembered where the traps were after they vanished, not triggering any of them.

Sensing that the spellcaster's exhaustion was bringing the battle to its climax, the messenger moved to finish it in one glorious strike. A powerful beat of his wings threw him high into the air. The spellcaster took the chance to shoot a force blast from his impressive staff, boosted by consuming the charges it had built up from every melee strike landed throughout the duel. The messenger quickly folded his wings in front of him, absorbing much of the damage but the heavy impact still sent him tumbling back, feathers scattering from pummeled wings.

It was not enough. All it accomplished was making the messenger even more determined to finish the spellcaster with his ultimate attack. He glared down at the man,

who had moved into the centre of the glowing lines that marked the progress of the battle. Glowing lines, the messenger realised, that looked very different when viewed from above.

At ground level, the lines were nothing but random shapes, left behind by Clive's staff as it moved. From above, viewed as a flat plane instead of in three dimensions, it looked suspiciously like a ritual circle. Suddenly he remembered all the moments of strange, impractical movement the spellcaster had gone through in the battle. He had put it down to inexperience and adhering too closely to fixed forms, and he suspected that truly was the case. But somehow, the spellcaster had managed to do something else as well.

He would have needed to remember every required nuance, adding to the ritual diagram opportunistically as the fight allowed. The kind of mind that could keep all that together was staggering, and the messenger hoped that the spellcaster had made a mistake in the process. He almost certainly had, as getting it right would be near impossible, yet the messenger was certain, deep in his gut, that there weren't any mistakes.

The messenger met the man's eyes. The spellcaster's expression had been blank throughout the battle, but now it was not. The messenger's blood turned cold on seeing the gleeful malevolence on the spellcaster's face as he held up his staff and chanted a ritual trigger.

"Let loose wrath's ascension: Magister's Ballista."

The messenger initiated his ultimate attack power. It didn't, strictly speaking, have a name, but he thought of it as Descent of the King. He did not tell anyone about the name. The power launched him towards the ground, but surprise had cost him. The spellcaster began his short chant as the messenger was startled by the revelation of the ritual, hesitation costing him in the critical moment. His plunging attack was gathering what he thought of as unstoppable momentum when a force spear shot up and stopped it.

The spear had shot from the end of the spellcaster's staff, and it did not just stop the messenger but sent him tumbling up in the other direction. The momentum of his attack was easily overwhelmed, and the spear was far from done. It turned around and then shot into the messenger again. Over and over it landed, never giving the messenger a chance to recover as it grew weaker and weaker. He was bloodied and beaten by attack after attack, juggled helplessly in the air. The spear impaled a wing on one pass and half-blinded him on another. He was too disoriented to see the man on the ground directing the spear, waving his arm like a conductor.

Clive didn't stop the spear from juggling the messenger until the magic of the ritual was expended, even though he was sure the messenger was long dead. What he did do was have the recording crystal zoom in as the messenger went from glorious warrior to avian road kill. Clive felt the dimensional space dissolving around him and he released the magic of Onslow's vessel. Normally that would return the familiar to a tattoo state on Clive's chest, but the dead vessel was empty now. Onslow's spirit would not return until Clive summoned a fresh vessel, the old one dissolving into rainbow smoke. Clive didn't even remove himself from the stench of it.

"I'll bring you back to me, little buddy," he whispered.

Many other adventurers had been caught up in the wave of messenger isolation attacks, some coming out on top and some coming out dead. Humphrey had escaped fairly quickly, having taken his messenger apart. He and the rest of the team continued to fight messengers and monsters as they waited for Jason and Clive to escape.

Jason's isolation was a type that others could see but not interfere with, those making the attempt finding themselves damaged and tossed away by a barrier surrounding each combatant. They could see Jason and his opponent, however, and were not especially worried. The mix of indignation and frustration on his opponent's face told them that Jason was doing what Jason did.

The one they worried about was Clive. Not only was he one of their weaker individual combatants but they couldn't see what was happening. He had vanished into a dimensional space and they dreaded seeing a messenger reappear with his corpse. Instead, Belinda was startled as Clive reappeared right in front of her, battered but alive. Also, alone.

"What happened to the messenger?" she asked.

Clive shoved her backwards and a wet mass of flesh and feathers fell from above, spraying silver-gold blood when it crashed between them with a juicy splat.