

Chapter 800

The Man Who Commands the Lightning

Rain hammered from a dark sky, the light choked off by black clouds that turned day into night. The erratic flashes of illumination were unwelcome, coming as they did from the deadly strikes of lightning. Each stroke of lightning passed, leaving fresh victims and thunder rumbling in the dark. The flashes meant that no one adapted to the lighting conditions.

In this battle, the powers possessed by the combatants were not those usually valued. In a pitched battle, the power to soar over the battlefield and drop large-area attacks was the ideal. In this case, humble perception powers were key. Anyone able to understand what was going on through the darkness, mud and chaos was a precious treasure.

Fearful of the lightning, no one took to the sky. The muddy ground had been turned to slurry by thousands of feet slamming down with the strength to smash rocks. Enemies were hard to tell from allies, especially when alliances were reluctant. The grace and power of silver-rankers had devolved into a slogging muddy brawl. Sodden clothes were plastered to bodies caked in mud. The icy chill of the rain crawled under armour and into every wound and body crevice.

The largest of the battle's three sides belonged to a trio of Undeath priests. The priests were elite essence users, making them the strongest individuals on the field. Their pallid messengers and the undead they commanded were weaker than the opposing forces but compensated with sheer numbers. Two out of every three combatants belonged to their side.

The second-largest faction belonged to the brighthearts. They had more than twenty brighthearts before casualties, but only two had claimed territories and imprinted on messengers. One of these was Lorus, a fire-aspect brightheart whose messengers were likewise possessed of flame powers. Each was shrouded in steam as they evaporated the rain around them and flung out streams, bolts and exploding balls of fire.

Shielding the fire messengers were earth-affinity messengers. They had inherited the toughness of the massive brightheart Durrum, who led them from the front. Lorus was pushing aggressively, in spite of casualties, while Durrum was more conservative. He could feel the enemy numbers through the ground and knew that victory meant every life on their own side had to be traded for three or more of the enemy. He had no interest in being the last man standing in a field of death.

Both Lorus and Durrum had arrived in the territory after claiming another and looking to expand. While their standoff never came to blows, it lasted so long that the choice was taken from them. The Undeath priests and the Builder cult showed up almost simultaneously, each staking a claim.

The brighthearts naturally joined up to fight the interlopers, but Lorus had surprised Durrum by also attacking the Builder cult. Durrum hated the Builder cult as much as every other brightheart, yet had been willing to abide by their alliance. The Undeath faction's numerical advantage showed exactly why it was needed.

The Builder cultists had apparently thought the same and were surprised by the attack of the fire messengers. This swiftly devolved into a three-way battle, all to the benefit of the undead whose enemies fought amongst each other.

Dorrurum attempted to reconcile the Builder cult and the brighthearts, to little success. The cult was wary after the sneak attack and Lorus had no intention of stopping his attack, even without the earth-element messengers. Dorrurum ordered his forces, brightheart followers and messengers, to do nothing but defend themselves and disengage from the cultists. Unfortunately for his efforts, the concept of orders was optimistic in the face of pounding rain, crashing thunder and brutal, chaotic battle.

Durrum was determined to unify the cultists and the brighthearts. He knew the attempt was almost certainly doomed, but almost certain was not absolutely certain. If things stayed as they were, he had no doubt they would all die, so he decided to make one last attempt to get Lorus to stop attacking the cult. If it failed, he would withdraw his forces in the hope that abandoning the field would prompt Lorus and the cult to do the same. They would lose the battle but at least some would survive. Not all would become meat for the necromancy of the priests.

Dorrurum fought his way close to Lorus. His earth powers left him unobstructed by mud and strong enough to hurl any obstacle aside. This meant enemy messengers or undead who he tossed into the backline or straight up with his massive strength. More than once, lightning came down to strike the victims out of the air.

He came close to where Lorus was surrounded by his followers. The brighthearts other than Durrurum and Lorus had split themselves into three groups, following one, the other or neither of the territory holders. Lorus was surrounded by his followers while Dorrurum had only one beside him, the rest still manning the frontline.

“LORUS!” Durrum roared. “Are you betraying us?”

“I’m not the one trying to make nice with Builder cult filth!” Lorus shouted back. “You think I don’t see you backing off from every fight?”

“They’re our allies! We need them and they need us, or the undead kill everyone. Even with them, it’s going to be a hard battle. Without them, we all die!”

“Help me kill the cultists then and we can focus on the undead.”

“That won’t work, Lorus. Every second we spend arguing or fighting the cultists takes us closer to defeat. You’re killing us.”

“I will burn out the cultists and I’ll burn out the undead.”

“Can you not count? We don’t have the numbers. Even if we unify right now, we might get overrun anyway.”

“We don’t need numbers when we have the power!”

“What power? I don’t know what you’re talking about, but we don’t have that!”

“Of course you don’t think so, you earthen clot. Those of us who carry the fire know better.”

“You’re just talking about fire powers?” Durrum asked incredulously. “Then see how your fire messengers do without my earth messengers shielding them. I’m withdrawing and saving everyone I can. I suggest you do the same.”

“Traitor!”

“Traitor? You attacked our allies! I’m not a traitor, Lorus. I just have my eyes open to see the completely gods-damned obvious.”

“Durrum,” the earth brightheart’s companion said, grabbing the big man by the shoulder. “Something’s happening.”

Someone was saying the same to Lorus and they all turned to look at the frontline of the battle, as much as there was one in the chaos. The lightning that had plagued the battlefield was no longer coming down on everyone but only the Undeath faction. Not only was the lightning suddenly target selecting but it was also behaving abnormally.

After striking one target the bolts arced to another, jumping from one target to the next like links in a chain. Each arc was weaker than the one that came before, diminishing until the power was expended. Even the lesser damage was still impressive and the bolts came down thick and fast. Some arcs even met, exploding in a discharge that was fairly weak but covered a wide area. Every arc brought a fresh peal of thunder, assaulting the air with a constant, violent crash.

“What is going on?” Durrum muttered, inaudible over the staccato rumbling.

Lorus proved more focused and opportunistic. While Durrum was distracted, he ordered his messengers to rise into the air and make a sweeping strike on the Builder cult. Realising what was happening at the last moment, Durrum dropped to his knees and plunged his hands through the elbow-deep mud and unto the earth below. The fire

messengers, having risen into the air, unleashed a barrage of fire powers, from bolts and spears of flame to explosive fireballs and burning wheels, spinning through the air like fireworks.

Durrum dumped almost every scrap of mana he had, retaining just enough to stay conscious. A wall of stone erupted from the ground in front of the Builder cult's gathered forces, disappearing in a cloud of dust as the fire attacks landed on it. Blasting and sizzling sounds emerged from the dust, orange, yellow and white light flaring within.

Durrum knew that even expending all of his power was not enough to stop a barrage like that alone. Even so, he knew the cultists were not easy to kill and hoped they would withdraw. If they were alive, he at least had a chance to mend fences later.

The observers didn't wait long to see the results, the rain setting the dust within seconds. It was followed by a cloud of steam that lingered a little longer before also clearing.

The stone wall was all but gone, only a few shattered remnants left behind. Some sections had been detonated by the attack magic while others had melted through, leaving pools of lava throwing up more steam as the rain cooled it. The source of the larger steam cloud was a second wall behind the first, this one made of ice.

The ice wall was in better shape than the stone one, but not by much. Most of it had melted away, the resulting water disappearing in the rain and mud. Large chunks of ice were scattered around but some slender sections of wall remained standing. They were chipped and cracked, often with shards of stone embedded in them.

Not many paid attention as an exhausted Dustin poked his head out from behind one. Most eyes were on the startled Builder cultists that had been shielded by the twin walls. Even with that protection, no small number of them looked frazzled by fire magic, but nothing life-threatening. The cultist messengers, body parts held together by metal joints and beams, were the most powerful of the messenger slaves. The cultists themselves were looking wary, watching for attacks from all sides. They were the only ones paying real attention to Dustin who was just as spent as Durrum.

"THAT'S ENOUGH!" a voice bellowed from above. It carried past the rain and even cut through the thunder, clearly through the aid of magical enhancement. Neil descended through the air in a personal flight device in the shape of a cage with a curved iron top and bottom, connected by vertical bars. Electricity arced around it, over the cap, down the bars to the base and back up again. The fire messengers moved to surround him and Neil looked to Lorus.

"Have your forces descend," Neil ordered him. He spoke softly yet his voice carried.

“You’re in no position to make demands, outsider,” Lorus shouted.

Lightning struck Neil’s cage, shrouding it in a storm of electricity before it subdued to the previous level.

“I won’t ask again,” Neil said, his voice filled with calm promise. The air calmed with him, the lightning abating. The last peals of thunder finished rumbling, leaving only the sound of the rain. Even the battle had stopped as all eyes were on Neil.

“Don’t be even more the fool, Lorus,” Durrum said. “He’s looking for someone to make a demonstration on. Don’t give him a reason to make it you.”

Lorus glared up at Neil but made an angry downward gesture and the messengers floated to the ground. Neil turned from Lorus to address the distant priests of Undeath, his voice flooding out from the cage.

“Priests. I command the lightning and you have tasted what that means. You have numbers enough that if you fight to the death it will cost us, but the death will be yours. If you yield your claim to this territory and leave, we will not chase. You can live to fight another day, in another place. One where the sky itself is not against you.”

One of the brighthearts around Lorus yelled at Neil that they would never let the undead go. Neil didn’t look, only casually pointed. The bolt of lightning didn’t kill the man and Neil cast a spell, still without looking. Life Bolt was a healing spell faster than it was powerful, but it would keep the man alive. Neil turned to look at Lorus who glowered back but stayed silent. A small smile crossed Neil’s face and he turned his gaze back across the battlefield to look at the distant priests.

“Well?” he demanded, but he already had his answer. The undead and the pale messengers were already pulling back. None gave chase; no one foolish enough to cross the man who commands the lightning.