

## Chapter 683

### The Strongest Arrow in His Quiver

Marek offered a mental salute to the man rampaging through the monster horde. He had managed to overhear one of the man's companions call him Humphrey, and Marek hoped he would survive to eventually reach gold-rank. He would like to face him in battle, perhaps finding a clue in that confrontation to push his own advancement forward. He lamented that while this battlefield had many exceptional silver-ranked enemies, the golds were only passable. It seemed that the defenders of the city had limited care for the civilians of the entertainment district.

With the gold-rankers being adequate but unexceptional, Marek wished he'd been chosen for other battlefields. He could sense more impressive essence users in other parts of the city, including one whose aura was a match for most messengers.

He turned his attention to the silver-ranker he suspected of being Asano. Two people with such unusual auras implied they were connected, perhaps with the gold-ranker instructing the silver. If he personally intervened, would the gold-ranker move to assist, giving him the chance for a more exciting battle?

Marek shook his head, scolding himself. Compromising the strategic situation for personal ends was the kind of behaviour he despised in a certain breed of messenger that he looked down on. That most of his fellow messengers fell into that group was a misfortune he lamented regularly.

Marek frowned as he sensed the team he sent to harass Asano lose one of their number. He was impressed, having sent neither rash nor weak people to contain the man. Even so, the harbinger butterflies were still not establishing themselves, so the situation required no further intervention. Marek did not want to lose people, but some casualties were inevitable.

The man Humphrey also did not require Marek's intervention. For all he was impressively carving a path through the monster horde, time would put an end to the rampage more effectively than a costly confrontation. The unstable power driving him would soon come to an end, one way or another. Humphrey was certainly destructive, yet still failed to impact the battle as much as the wide area attack specialists amongst the adventurers. Marek's messengers were of more use containing them than going after Humphrey. He could easily kill messengers in his current state, and Marek could afford to lose however many summoned monsters he took down.

The monsters were not infinite, however, for all the expense they had employed to make it seem so to the defenders. The Voice of the Will, Jes Fin Kaal, had brought in the artefacts that were enhancing the number of monsters the summoners could call up at once. The acquisition was made against the advice of Marek and other gold-rankers, but she had overruled them. Even so, she never explained what made them worth the resources and favours expended to obtain them, significant even to the messengers.

At least the expensive artefacts were located outside the barrier. If the adventurers were able to reach them and shut off the monster spigot, the raid would come to a swift end, the costs coming to nothing. He wondered if Jes Fin Kaal would see it that way, since the success of the city raid was clearly not her true objective. Whatever political game she was playing, it unfortunately had the approval of the astral king, or his disinterest at the very least. Otherwise, he would have stopped her already.

Again, Marek told himself not to dwell on it. All he had to do was an adequate job and get as many of their people out alive as was viable. If he started digging into whatever plots the voice was carrying out through the city invasion, it would only cost him, and get him nothing. He was sure that she was scheming against someone amongst the messengers, but equally confident it was not him. He was carefully apolitical as a defence mechanism.

This was part of why he had been so reserved in directing his portion of the raid, even as those under his command chafed at his conservative strategy. The gold-rankers were alright, being seasoned warriors, but Marek could feel the hunger in his silver-rankers under his command. They were straining like an untrained beast on a leash, eager to cover themselves in glory and adventurer blood.

They were going to be disappointed. Marek was never going to let the most reckless element of his forces do as they wished and, if the adventurers managed to force a direct conflict with the messengers, he would signal the withdrawal. He wasn't sacrificing anyone he didn't have to on the altar of Jes Fin Kaal's schemes, even if she was voice of the astral king's will.

He could sense that in other battlefields, some commanders had made different decisions, chasing the same glory as their silver-rank subordinates. That was far from enough to convince him to let his messengers loose. It accomplished just the opposite, the casualties he sensed under more proactive commanders being exactly what he wanted to avoid.

It was, however, time to make a change. The adventurers were starting to press in, their affliction specialists starting to take hold in spite of the messengers working to

suppress them. Unlike the man working alone behind enemy lines, these were people with a frustrating variety of afflictions and delivery systems, as well as entire teams dedicated to making sure they were used.

It was time to draw the strongest arrow in his quiver. It was one that most other commanders had already fired, to what Marek considered insufficient effect. While Marek was forced to concede that aura superiority had its advantages in the establishing moments of a conflict, he saw using it immediately as a waste. Essence users had demonstrated time and again that when given time to adjust, they could fight at near-full capability under aura suppression.

Compared to that, a sudden and well-timed aura wave could finish an enemy already under pressure, or reverse a disadvantageous trend. That was what Marek faced in his own battlefield, so it was time to turn the tide.

A large wave of destructive magic headed for Marek, his gold-rank opponent having cast a large spell while Marek had been contemplating his options. He glanced up at a house-sized sphere of blue-gold flames barrelling down on him, burning through monsters as it went. Marek fed mana into his wings and flapped them a single time in the direction of the fireball. It was blasted back the way it had come, causing the gold-rank adventurers to scramble out of the way.

Marek sighed with boredom, wishing that the only capable adventurers in his battle hadn't been silver-rank. He took out his communication stone and issued a directive to every messenger under his command.

“Unleash your auras.”

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In the early stages of the battle over the entertainment district, the area-specialist teams had started off strong. They had been carving large chunks out of the monsters, which earned them the focused attention of messengers, suppressing their effectiveness. Then, slowly but surely, they started pushing back the messengers, once again thinning out the monsters seeking to descend and dig through to the civilian bunker.

The adventurers were becoming so effective that more monsters arrived at the ground dead than alive. As one of the adventurers working at ground level, Rufus had to watch out for monsters falling like rain. Despite operating at ground level, though, Rufus was spending little time on the ground. He moved through the air with a combination of silver-rank acrobatics and short-range teleport powers. Many adventurers failed to fully leverage their new physical limits after ranking up, but Rufus was too well-trained for that.

He used the monsters themselves as platforms, hopping between them like a frog moving between lily pads.

Rufus didn't use the buildings often despite the frequent convenience of a rooftop. The entertainment district looked like a bombing site, with no building having escaped damage. He didn't trust any of them to not collapse under him.

The monsters often didn't react as Rufus landed on them, lacerated them with his gold and silver swords before moving on, leaving gold and silver flames in his wake. The summoned creatures were under a compulsion to dig down to the bunker, mostly hovering in the air and firing ranged attacks at the ground. Many didn't even fight back against the adventurers, simply drilling down as far as they could before being taken out.

Rufus' afflictions were useful for setting up the big attacks that would hopefully shoot down messengers, but ineffective at clearing out monsters. The disadvantage of Rufus' eclectic power set was that any individual element was somewhat weak, requiring skill to draw out the potent synergies.

The main work of handling the monsters was being done by an affliction specialist. Rufus didn't know the woman but she was clearly effective, which both sides had come to recognise. A full dozen messengers had been deployed to suppress her, but three full adventuring teams had moved to counter.

The messengers had been well-chosen, all being protective types that appeared to have healthy amounts of defence, affliction resistance and even self-healing and cleansing. That was something an affliction specialist could overcome, given time and protection, but the more focus she had on the messengers, the less time she spent clearing out monsters.

As a result, the adventurers on the ground were increasingly feeling the pressure. Monsters were digging down, through layers of street, rock and buried magical protections, slowly uncovered and broken. Rufus picked a building that looked reasonably intact to land on and paused long enough to look over the situation. He opened a voice channel.

"Jason, are you busy?"

"No, actually. Things are swinging our way, so you can expect the messengers to drop the aura hammer soon. I'm getting ready for when that happens."

"Ready how?"

"The usual."

"Something stupid, self-destructive and absurdly attention grabbing?"

"Pretty much."

"Do you have a few moments before that happens?"

“I can spare a little time. I should probably scoot off before the messengers hunting me get here, anyway. What do you need?”

“I’ve got an affliction specialist dealing with her own set of messengers. She’ll get through them but they’re pretty shielded up, so it’s taking longer than we need it to. Any chance you could come in and brighten the messenger’s day?”

Jason stepped from the shadow of a broken section of wall.

“I can do that,” he said.

“It’s over—”

“I can sense it,” Jason said before Rufus had a chance to point. Rufus could barely sense anything amongst the mess of auras that was a magical battlefield, but Jason turned his gaze the right way immediately. He moved back to the shadow he had appeared from and vanished into it.

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Elseth Culie was frustrated. The teams defending her were doing an excellent job, but she wasn’t doing her part as fast as she needed. Some of the messengers had flexible but comprehensive full body armour that had to be dug through before she could afflict them directly. Others had classic bubble shields, while the more annoying ones had both. Some pushed off the afflictions on to proxies, such as the one who created clones of herself and the one who collected afflictions into her feathers, shooting them back at Elseth’s defenders.

She had answers to all of these, from resonating or disruptive force afflictions to spells that replaced afflictions on a target them moment they were disposed of. But with the messengers also purging, dispelling and cleaning, as well as replacing dissolved shields and disintegrated armour, it was taking too long. With each passing moment she more desperately needed to refocus on monster slaying.

Suddenly, someone was next to her, startling her with its lack of aura. At first she thought it was a monster, draped in what were clearly magic shadows. It glanced at her with alien eyes from within a dark hood.

“I’m going to eat your afflictions,” he told her in a man’s voice. His tone was cold with a hint of apology, but the clear intention to do as he said, whatever she might have wanted. His shadow rose up like a living thing and he stepped into it, disappearing. Then he was amongst the messengers, loudly chanting a spell.

*“Feed me your sins.”*

The transcendent light of messenger life force shone from within the messengers, tainted by Elseth’s afflictions. She was familiar with the spell he was using; a rare one that

usually awakened by those with intentions that were bright but powers that were dark. She was unsurprised, then, as her afflictions were devoured and transcendent damage was left in their place.

Transcendent damage ignored any protections and dug right into the messengers, who immediately retreated. Elseth was certain they were going in search of the healing and cleansing they would need to survive. With all the afflictions she had dumped on them turned transcendent, it would take a lot.

As the messengers fled upwards, the shadowy man floated down. Her defenders let him through as they looked to her for new direction.

“We need to get back to clearing monsters,” she declared. It was an obvious statement, but the first part of command was being certain and confident. Knowing what she was doing was also useful, but lower priority.

The man landed gently next to her and pushed the hood from his head. He had sharper features than humans preferred, but his human face had an exotic appeal to elven sensibilities.

“Prepare your people for an aura assault,” the man warned her. “You reclaiming control over the ground level will probably be the final straw that provokes...”

He trailed off as an aura dropped down like a hammer. The messengers in the battlefield had all unleashed their auras at once, silver and gold-rankers harmonised in a symphony of power. The auras of the messengers were fundamentally different to those of essence users, as if they were not just spiritual but physical. There was a weight to their suppressive force, and Elseth felt her aura suppressed as if the titanic hand of a god was reaching down to cover her.

That was when she finally sensed the aura of the man in front of her. It swept out like a colonial power, claiming territory as it pushed out what was there before. He created a bubble that felt more like the messengers than his fellow essence users, and while Elseth’s aura was freed up, she still did not feel comfortable. There was an overwhelming sense of domination, her spiritual senses telling her that she was safe only by the benevolence of the power controlling the area around her. A power that demanded obedience.

Elspeth and the other adventurers looked at the man with unease as he tilted his head to look up. A strange monster looking like an empty cloak surrounded by floating orbs appeared. She felt some of the others tense but they quickly felt the link between the man and his familiar.

“Gordon,” the man said. “Let’s get to work.”