

Chapter 684

I Have to Go Fight Evil

The commander of the adventurer forces defending the entertainment district was Eilaf Hayel, a gold-rank elven adventurer and Yaresh native. He was a veteran of fighting the messengers, having assaulted their strongholds more than a dozen times. He was extremely familiar with the aura suppression tactic they employed and how it impacted the morale of adventurers. The fact that they hadn't used it from the opening moments of the battle was not a relief but a concern.

Eilaf's gold-rank senses allowed him to monitor the auras around the city. In most of the battlegrounds, the messengers had deployed their auras immediately. This had helped them gain a foothold as they came through the breach, but Eilaf had watched in his own battlefield that the ceaseless torrent of monsters didn't need the help.

That the commander he was up against held their auras in reserve suggested that he was not underestimating the adventurers, which was unfortunate. One of the weaknesses common to messengers in Eilaf's encounters with them was an overwhelming arrogance that led them to underestimate opponents. He had hoped a messenger that didn't undervalue their opposition was weak enough that they had to act with caution.

That hope was forlorn. The messenger commander was not just powerful but the single strongest messenger Eilaf had ever seen. Most messengers were marginally weaker than a well-trained adventurer, and while there were certainly exceptions, he had never seen anything like this.

The commander was shrugging off the most powerful attacks that Eilaf and his fellow gold-rankers could throw at him, and sometimes throwing them right back. Fortunately, the messenger was more interested in commanding his forces than pressing the adventurers by attacking in person. He was likewise directing his forces conservatively, a situation Eilaf wanted to continue for as long as possible.

The Battle of Yaresh, not just in the entertainment district but across the city, was essentially a race. The messengers were trying to dig out and slaughter as many civilians as they could before the city barrier restored itself, trapping them inside. Eilaf didn't know why his counterpart did not push for speed, but as it was the only mistake the man seemed to be making, Eilaf wanted to capitalise on it.

Eilaf had his own gold-rankers pressure the other gold-rank messengers, prioritising them over the commander. Aware that the conservative strategy could be a trap to lure them in, Eilaf didn't let his people push too hard and overextend themselves. Both sides

being conservative was to the adventurers' advantage, so he would let that play out as long as he could.

The move proved a sound one. Eilaf came to suspect that the enemy commander was less than enthralled with his assignment and was more interested in running out the clock than pushing for success. If the man would rather keep his people alive and leave unsuccessful than sacrifice them for victory, Eilaf was the last person who would get in his way. He just made sure that the commander was occupied keeping his gold-rankers alive rather than interfering with the silver-rankers.

Things continued to go well, as there were some real gems amongst the silver-rank adventurers. The more the battle turned in favour of the adventurers, however, the more Eilaf anticipated the aura drop. The adventurers had all been warned about messenger auras and many were already veterans who had experienced them already. Even so, Eilaf wished he could go around and warn them all again. That was not practical in a battle, but he could at least prepare his gold-rankers.

Eilaf was unsurprised when their foes finally unleashed auras that hit the adventurers like a physical force. It was, to a small degree, albeit not enough to cause any harm. The real impact was spiritual, with just enough kinetic force to show the essence users that messenger auras were fundamentally different.

It was a subtle but effective intimidation tactic, which was ultimately the purpose of the aura wave. Suppressing the auras of adventurers did have a tactical impact as aura essence abilities were shut off, but it wasn't the main goal. Having their auras pushed down left the adventurers feeling weak and helpless, like bullied children.

That reaction wasn't universal amongst adventurers, with many fighting on, unconcerned. Those were mostly veterans who had besieged messenger strongholds and tasted their auras in the past. For most, however, a suppressed aura left them feeling vulnerable and exposed. Such tactics were key means by which the messengers propagated their sense of superiority.

The adventurers didn't collapse under the assault, but it certainly arrested their forward momentum. Eilaf and his gold-rankers had the edge in both numbers and, discounting the enemy commander, individual strength. The combat power became less relevant as the gold-rankers on both sides moved to pure spiritual conflict, floating in place as it looked like they were trying to stare each other down. If not for the advantage in numbers, the adventurers would have been overwhelmed by the messengers' advantage in spiritual strength.

The silver-rankers were likewise clashing aura-to-aura, and the adventurers were struggling. They did not give up the physical conflict the way the gold-rankers had, but their spiritual battle was reflected in physical combat. The previous advance of the adventurers had come to a halt, while the messengers went from holding back to pushing back, taking the fight to their enemy.

Elite adventurers were well-trained in aura use, but the messengers simply had a higher baseline. Not only were their auras stronger but even the least messenger had a refined grasp of how to use it that few could match. Adventurers were used to heavily outclassing any individual foe, and often found themselves taken aback at how close messengers came to matching them. As a result, first encounters with messengers were the ones most likely to go poorly.

Eilaf had seen green adventurers struggle against messengers time and again. He felt unease in the auras of adventurers, and doubt could be a plague in a fighting force, and panic was a wildfire. Morale was the key to any battle, and the side that lost it was the side that broke, regardless of relative strength. The monster torrent was gaining ground against adventurers suddenly struck with hesitation. Unfortunately, all Eilaf could do was hope that his adventurers had the steel to hold on.

Elseth Culie was finally getting back to clearing out monsters after the messengers fled to seek healing. Her task became more urgent as the adventurers on the ground became less effective under the aura suppression blanketing the battlefield. Elseth and the teams protecting her were in a bubble that held the suppression off, centred on a man currently looking up.

Aano's aura was not unlike that of the messengers, if not even more domineering, but she quickly stopped worrying about that and focused on killing more monsters. Asano himself was not moving, watching as his alien familiar drew lines and symbols in the sky that glowed in blue and yellow. The creature Asano called Gordon was orbited by six blue and orange nebula orbs in the pattern of eyes. Each orb fired beams of blue or orange energy, leaving glowing shapes in the sky like fireworks that didn't stop lingering.

All six eyes drew intricately intersecting lines, the beams implausibly managing to never cross one another. The familiar was drawing a massive ritual circle, not just on a flat plane but in a sphere. Lines, runes and sigils were woven together in a floating sculpture of light.

The summoned monsters did not interfere with it or anyone inside Asano's aura, visibly fleeing from it. This left the other adventurers protected by the aura free to pour out

attacks. Elseth made up for lost time as best she could, giving no thought to her dwindling mana reserves as her spells pumped out mass afflictions that were already spreading through the monsters.

She only paused to pull out her most expensive mana potion and chug it down, taking the chance to look over what Gordon was doing. It had completed its sphere and started crafting smaller ones around it, connected by lines. The smaller spheres drifted around the central sphere on their own.

“An orrery?” she said, not realising it was out loud. The finished magical sculpture had formed an intricate and startlingly beautiful orrery, the smaller spheres moving around the larger central one. It was a massive creation, the size of a wealthy townhouse, and as she looked at it she realised that the sculpture was a ritual magic diagram, but unlike any she had seen before.

Like many adventurers, Elseth had a decent grounding in ritual magic. Even so, she failed to grasp even the most basic principles of what the familiar has crafted. She suspected that it operated on some magical paradigm completely outside of her experience.

“Gordon turned out to be something of a magic artist,” someone said and she looked over, not recognising the voice. It was Asano, proudly watching his familiar. She hadn’t realised it was him because his icy voiced had thawed, speaking warmly of Gordon. He turned to look at her.

“You should probably get back to the afflictions,” he suggested, his voice still soft. The friendly smile was completely undercut by the aura pouring out of him, oppressive and territorial. She was equally parts glad and astounded that it was holding off the messengers’ collective aura, but she also wanted to leave it as soon as possible.

While Gordon continued to draw the most outrageous and elaborate ritual Jason had ever seen, he concentrated on maintaining his aura against the messengers. They had somehow managed to blend their auras together into a singular force, a technique Jason would ask Amos Pensinata about later. The messenger aura was spread not just across the entire entertainment district but also the battlefield filling the sky above it. This dilution of power meant that Jason was able to push it back over a moderate area, only possible because the gold-rankers from each side were negating each other. He managed sufficient to shield the affliction specialist and the adventurers supporting her, with space for more adventurers who found them to take shelter. She went back to dosing monsters

while the rest lashed out with ranged attacks or left to guide other adventurers to the safety of Jason's aura.

There had been very few occasions in which Jason had truly opened up his aura, projecting it with as much strength as he could muster. It had reached the point of being too powerful, a danger Farrah had warned him of on the day she introduced him to auras. His aura also covered too much ground, pushing through all but the most extreme measures to constrain it. If not for the suppressive force of a full contingent of messengers, it would have spread out across the city, likely harming any normal-rankers that had not yet reached a bunker.

While he regretted that there would likely be collateral once Gordon was done, Jason's resolve did not falter. He could sense the messengers pushing back against the adventurers, allowing more and more monsters to safely descend. They had already started digging through the ground at an accelerated rate, growing closer to a breach of the bunker's defences. If he had even a chance to arrest the aura advantage of the messengers, he would take the chance.

Rufus arrived next to him in a flash of light, startling the adventurers whose defensive perimeter he had circumvented.

"You're doing something about this, right?"

"You expect me to stop the collective aura of who knows how many messengers, all by myself."

"Yes."

"You have some pretty outlandish expectations there, mate."

"Yes. I hate to break it to you, John," Rufus said, using Jason's fake name due to the nearby adventurers. "But you're the one who set up those expectations. Placed in an extreme circumstance, with power levels far above your own..."

He threw his arms out, indicating the wider battle.

"...you do something spectacularly outlandish..."

He pointed to the giant glowing orrery over their heads, then looked flatly at Jason.

"...that you probably shouldn't."

"There you go then," Jason told him. "You just said I shouldn't do it."

"Are you going to do it?"

"Of course I'm going to... sorry, give me a sec. I've got a thing."

Jason looked off into the middle distance, glaring at nothing.

"If you want to fight me, then come in here and get me," he declared to no one, then turned back to Rufus.

“Sorry about that. Anyway, shouldn’t you be taking out some messengers about now?”

“That’s why I’m here,” Rufus told him. “I want to time it for right after you do whatever you’re going to do. I’m hoping to take out a few in single shots.”

“How many afflictions have you left out there to absorb?” Jason asked.

“A lot,” Rufus told him. “So, get to it.”

“I’m waiting on Gordon to finish. He’s doing an amazing job, right?”

“It’s amazing to look at,” Rufus agreed. “What kind of magic is that?”

“I have my suspicions. I’m pretty sure Shade knows and isn’t telling me.”

“That is for the best, Mr Miller,” Shade asserted as he emerged from Jason’s shadow.

“So you say.”

“Since we’re waiting,” Rufus said, “do you have any sandwiches?”

“Who are you talking to?” Jason asked pulling out a sandwich wrapped in paper and handing the slightly larger half to Rufus. They both looked up at the monster-filled sky.

“Have you ever see this many monsters at once?” Rufus asked, then bit into his sandwich.

“Yep,” Jason said. “Not all flyers, like this, though. There was a vorger swarm that came pretty close.”

“In that astral space?”

“The one the Builder tried to take back? No, this was a transformation space. I told you about those, right?”

“When you explained them, they just sounded like astral spaces.”

“Bloke,” Jason scolded. “I’m starting to see why Clive gets cranky when people don’t understand astral magic. A transformation zone is a defence mechanism of reality, when the dimensional membrane has a localised catastrophic failure.”

“But they’re still a dimensional space you can go into, right? Does that just make it a kind of astral space?”

“You can go into a bath and you can go into the ocean, Rufus. Yes, you can slowly soap up your taught, black body and bald head with a sponge in both, but that doesn’t make your bathtub an ocean.”

“I’m not entirely comfortable with that analogy.”

“The point is, they’re different. But if you get both in the same space, you’ve got maybe a month before it blows a hole in the side of reality large enough to suck a planet into the astral. Where it stops existing, because there is no physical reality in the astral.”

“Yes, Jason, I know you saved the world. You mention it quite a lot.”

“You damn right I do. Do know how awesome that is? I do wish I could stop saving it from this dimensional nonsense all the time. I want to fight a guy with a weather machine.”

“Are you in any danger of getting to a point?” Rufus asked.

“About what.”

“You were telling me about when you saw a massive vorger swarm.”

“Oh, right. So, I was in a transformation zone, patching a hole in the side of the universe. I’m just about done when a bunch of vorger came through. There was a nightmare hag, too.”

“Another one? What did it show you that time?”

“It was kind of embarrassing, so I don’t want to say.”

“It’s fine. I’ll ask Farrah.”

“I didn’t tell Farrah.”

Rufus gave him a flat look.

“Please don’t ask Farrah.”

They realised that someone was staring at them and turned to look at the affliction specialist.

“What?” the asked simultaneously.

“Who are you people?”

“This is Rufus and I’m Ja... John. It’s not a fake name.”

Rufus shook his head.

“May I ask your name?”

“Elseth Culie.”

“It’s lovely to meet you,” Rufus told her. “I’ve noticed you’re the main reason the monsters haven’t cracked the bunker yet, so thank you.”

“Who are you?” she asked him.

“He’s a teacher and I’m a cook,” Jason told her.

“You were just talking about saving the world,” she said.

“I’m a very well-paid cook. Also, it wasn’t this world, so you don’t have to worry. Probably.”

Jason looked to his right as Gordon floated down next his, his work completed. They looked up at the final result, a glowing orrery like a solar system made of fireworks that refused to fade. Each sphere was comprised of a complex, nested array of lines, runes and sigils.

“Clive is going to be sorry he missed this,” Jason said as his cloak billowed around him and he rose up into the air.

“You could use a recording crystal,” Rufus suggested, calling up after him.

“No time,” Jason yelled back. “I have to go fight evil.”

“Some of my people have recording crystals,” Elseth offered. “A lot of teams are recording the battle for analysis and posterity.”

“I might take you up on that,” Rufus said. “Thank you.”

“Is your friend going to be able to make sense of that thing? It’s a ritual diagram, right?”

“It is,” Rufus said. “And no, he won’t know how it works. He’ll love it.”