

Chapter 677

Gary Goes To Work

Breaches to the barrier were happening all across the city, but one was unlike any of the others. Seen and heard from across the city, the messenger's only diamond ranker came down through the peak of the dome like an anvil through glass. The dome being penetrated released sound that reached the outer walls and force that shattered windows for kilometres. Adventurers were avoiding the central part of the city because of the ongoing garuda battle, but even at a distance many flyers were knocked out of the sky.

For most of the city's adventurers, the highest-level conflicts were more like a fireworks show than a battle they were participating in. Distant explosions made for a spectacular view, but getting to close held nothing but danger. Jason and his team paid minimal attention, trusting the city's own diamond-rank defenders to intercept. All they could do was hope that the city wasn't levelled in the process.

The high-level fights were mercifully out of reach of Jason's team in the entertainment district, and they had more than enough to be going on with. Enemies gushed through the local breach like water through cracks in a dam, mostly monsters but with a solid contingent of messengers. The adventurers outnumbered the messengers, but the monsters were a countless swarm.

No one on the field was lower than silver rank. While both sides had gold rankers, Jason was relieved to see that the adventures had a slim advantage in that regard. None of the monsters were gold rank, only messengers. His aura senses told him that the most powerful combatant was on the other side, however. Auras were far from a perfect measure of power, but Jason's instincts warned him about one of the messengers.

It was the man who had conjured the fireball that breached the barrier. His skin was light brown and his hair dark. He wore light leather armour, but any protection at all was rare amongst the messengers, as if to admit the need was to show weakness. The man's wings were shades of brown and grey, more like a bird than an angel.

Both sides were led by their gold rankers, although very little in the way of orders were going out. Summoned monsters swarmed down towards the adventurers defending on the ground, while the ones in the air thinned them out as best they could. The messengers sought to impede the adventurers as much as they could, with the gold-rank battles especially settling into a *détente*.

The gold-rankers of one side could swiftly decimate the other if they weren't forced to negate one another. It was a tense conflict that no smart silver-rank went anywhere near,

largely taking place in the higher reaches of the battle. At the low end, the advantage of flight the summons had against many ground defenders was ameliorated by their goal. If the monsters couldn't dig down to the bunker they had failed, so they were forced to come to the defenders. The result was a massacre, although not without casualties on the side of the adventurers. No matter how many monsters fell, however, there was always more pouring down.

Jason's team went to work, sticking to Humphrey's outlined strategy. Belinda and Clive made use of the rituals Clive had set up inside Onslow's shell that enhanced the beams and blasts coming from their magical staves and wands. Arrays of nested ritual diagrams were very hard to integrate without them interfering with one another, but Clive had spent much of the past few years perfecting the unusual practice of combat rituals.

Clive had been well aware that while he was a utility asset to the team, he was the least member when it came to combat. He had a few support abilities and one very powerful attack spell, but he often found himself feeling more like an auxiliary member than a full one. As such, he had spent much of the time Jason was absent working to improve his combat effectiveness.

He was never going to match Humphrey, Sophie and Jason, who were the combat mainstays. Belinda's versatility meant that she was always filling a gap, disabling enemies or making a team member even better than they already were. As for Neil, his value as healer was obvious. Clive couldn't change his powers and he was never going to be a solo combat star, so instead of trying to expend his abilities, he narrowed them.

Clive had long used combat rituals to enhance his effectiveness, largely inspired by his acquisition of very powerful staff and wand weapons. Combat rituals were largely looked down on by adventurers and magical researchers alike, but Clive was determined to take them as far they could be taken. The result was a collections of rituals that could be nested in tight arrays, turning a largely ignorable beam attack from his staff into an attack that rivalled an essence ability.

The result of Clive's efforts was that he and his familiar had become a turret bunker, pouring out attacks that ravaged the summoned monsters. At the same time, it was efficient enough that the barrage could be maintained for hours. Clive had mana enough to spare that he could feed extra to Onslow, resetting and enhancing the familiar's magic powers. As for any monsters that tried to assault them, Onslow's elemental powers could fend off any but the most concentrated assaults. While it took some preparation time, Clive finally felt that he could contribute to battle without absolutely needing the support of the team.

Gary's group of craftspeople and low-rank adventurers made their way through a city that looked like it was going through the apocalypse. Thunder pealed, not from storms but from the battle of behemoths only vaguely visible through the choking dust. Stones from the size of a fist to the size of a house fell from the sky at random, meaning that the sky had to be watched at all times.

The biggest problem facing the group was that their destination, a bunker, was the same place the messengers were targeting the breaches. The craftspeople and their adventurer support team hurried through the city, picking up straggling civilians as they went. Fortunately this didn't slow them too much as the adventurers were all chosen for their ability to hasten others. One sped up their movement speed, while another had a pack of rideable lizard familiars. One adventurer picked more civilians up and carried them telekinetically.

It did not take long from hearing the barrier broken open before the monsters found them. Gary knew that he would not be able to shield the civilians and bronze-rankers against the summoned creatures. They were all silver-rank and he was the only real combatant, so he would need to take the fight to the monsters. The other craftspeople were of at least some help, conjuring ice barriers and water shields or raising up walls of earth. They even managed to fight back, shooting obsidian spears and other projectiles, but they were not fighters.

Under Gary's direction, they strove to keep moving rather than secure kills. Any monster that wanted to slink back into the sky, Gary was happy to let go. The group sustained injuries and lost a couple of civilians to a monster that fired sonic blasts. That one was left struggling to fly back into the sky, weighed down with a coating of molten metal.

Gary's senses told him that the whole city had become a war zone as adventurers, messengers and monsters clashed. Hard-hit streets became even worse as powers flew off in every direction, tearing up pavement and hammering buildings. Scattered civilians too slow or stubborn to reach a shelter were pummelled by stray magic or collapsing buildings.

Despite losing a couple of civilians, the group was largely optimistic as they drew close to the bunker. The craftspeople had done a surprisingly good job of deterring the monsters, even if they mostly escaped alive. Gary was about to warn the group to be wary as they rounded the next corner when an aura emerged from the throng of monsters that stood out from the others.

A messenger flew around a building and descended to float just above the ground in front of them. Gary could sense he was of the summoner type from the way his aura interacted with the monsters in the area. He was slightly taller than even Gary's height. Beautiful, with golden hair and pale skin, his sculpted body delicately draped in loose clothes of white and gold. His bare feet floated just over the flagstone street, the pristine white wings spread out behind him undulating softly. The dust that was clinging in Gary's fur and on his armour did not touch the messenger, as if afraid to soil it.

Gary knew that the messenger being only a silver-ranker did not mean their numbers were an advantage. He was certain the summoner could call on the monsters with swiftness, and probably even boost their power. Even if he could seize the momentum before the summons were brought into play, messengers were no joke to fight alone.

"I have sensed you driving off my creatures," the messenger told them, his voice a melody of the heavens. "That will end here."

There was almost pity in the messenger's voice, Gary's hackles raising as the beautiful man looked down on them. The messenger looked at him and smiled, then pushed out with his aura. Despite being one man, he suppressed the silver-rank craftspeople who had never trained their auras for combat. The messenger's aura was unlike anything they had encountered, a brutal and almost physical force. Compared to delicate appearance of the messenger, his aura was that of a savage thug.

Only Gary's aura held strong, the benefits of training with Jason. Jason's aura was even worse than this man's, with many of the same traits yet even more oppressive. Jason had been ruthless in training his companions to resist aura suppression, and none of them shirked. They all knew how dangerous auras could be.

The others in Gary's group did not fare as well. The civilians collapsed outright, one of them going into a seizure but Gary had neither the time nor the power to help them. The bronze-rankers and the craftspeople fared about the same, the adventurers better trained while the craftspeople were stronger. They all turned pale as their auras shrank like mice under the gaze of a hawk.

Gary's aura wasn't suppressed, but he was definitely outmatched, even when the messenger was simultaneously suppressing the others. It wavered but held, trembling under the strain. Many of the others had dropped to one or both knees under pressure that was spiritual rather than physical. Gary squared himself, planting his feet. His right hand held his hammer, the head glowing red-yellow with heat. His armour and shield did the same, glowing between plates of dark metal. His head was bare, having not conjured his helmet so as to not restrict his line of sight on the sky.

The messenger looked at Gary with surprise, as if at a pet that had demonstrated an unexpected trick. He floated forward, stopping directly in front of Gary.

“Kneel, savage, and you shall live. Serve me, and I shall even spare these... people... out of respect for your value as a slave.”

Gary grinned defiance through lion’s teeth. What he’d heard about the arrogance of messengers had proven true, as had the fact that it could lead them to make tactically unsound choices.

“You want savage?” he growled.

Gary’s roar hit the messenger like a cannon, the pure sonic force of it shooting the messenger back faster than the bronze-rankers could even track. The messengers smashed through the wall of the building it had come around to confront the group, while the building itself was covered in spiderweb cracks.

“Pull it out,” Gary snarled and the foundry golem at the rear of the group opened its chest cavity. Glowing hot chains shot out of the golem and into the hole made by the messenger entering the building. They stopped for a moment and then started pulling back rapidly.

The only light they could see through the hole was the glow of the chains which were wrapped around something in the dark. They hauled it out with industrial inevitability as the chains went back into the chest cavity of the golem. The messenger became visible as he reached the hole, looking far less untouchable. He was caked with dust and grime now, sear marks burnt black into white wings where the chains were binding them.

The messenger did not allow himself to just be dragged along, ignoring the sizzle from his hands as he gripped the chains. He twisted himself as he was dragged, planting his feet at the edge of the hole and hauling back against the golem. For a moment, his movement was arrested as he struggled for control.

Gary was standing next to the chains, extending from the golem behind him. He tossed his hammer casually in the air, grabbed one of the chains and yanked, sending the messenger hurtling in his direction. Even bound the messenger’s wings managed to turn his tumble in the air into a glide, but it came to an unceremonious end before he could arrest his momentum. Gary snatched his hammer out of the air and brought it down, smashing the messenger into the ground.

The winged man’s face had hit hard enough to crack a flagstone, but Gary was far from done. He grabbed a wing and flipped the messenger like a steak. He felt the beleaguered man’s aura reaching for the monsters nearby and distracted him with a hammer to the face. The shield dropped from Gary’s arm, pinning the messenger’s chest

and arms when Gary planted a foot on it. His head visible, the messenger glared up at Gary as he tried to push him off, but Gary was intractable as a mountain.

Gary looked back at the people behind him, under his protection. His mind flashed to Farrah's death, when he could do nothing but watch helplessly as dimensional invaders killed her in front of him. He looked down at the messenger, gripped his hammer in both hands and went to work.