

Chapter 906

The Protection of a Dictator

Having been established decades ago, the Holy Army of Knowledge had many elite units at silver and even gold rank. Other armies, both of nations and other gods, had lacked the forewarning of the goddess of knowledge. Without the lead time for recruiting and preparation, their ranks were mostly comprised of people who had ranked up using monster cores. They hadn't intended to be adventurers, having little combat experience outside of monster surges. But when the call to war from their monarchs and gods came, they had not shirked their duties.

After more than a decade of war, many of these forces were battle-hardened veterans. There were always new recruits, however, and even veteran troops fell short of adventurers with the same level of experience. Many forces were reliable and experienced, but less powerful due to fewer resources and less training. They often had an elite core leadership of current or former adventurers, but they were inevitably lacking compared to premier armies and Adventure Society task groups.

That was not to say that these lesser groups had no value. Experienced hands were always assets, and there were far too many places for the elite groups to be stationed. Low-priority areas where the messengers had shown no interest were often protected by locally raised armies, taking on not just messenger threats but monster hunting roles when so many adventurers were busy. In low-threat zones, these less powerful groups were usually enough.

War, however, was capricious and cruel. Circumstances could change suddenly and without warning, turning a quiet backwater into a contested battleground. Such was the case in Segurado, a small city state in what, on Earth, would be Uruguay.

The Segurado army was not an elite force. Even the adventurers leading them were those that could be spared from more critical areas. There had been no indication that the messengers had any interest in the area until, suddenly, they were everywhere. They had flown low, over and even through the jungle, so as to avoid detection from flying observer patrols. There was alarm magic in the jungle, but it had been avoided or disabled. That was always a threat, given the superior ritual magic of the messengers.

The messenger force had closed on the city walls before anyone realised, watchful defenders only sensing them as they made their final approach. Instead of moving straight to the attack, however, they abandoned their low altitude positions and soared high into the air. Their numbers were so great they darkened the sky, as if storm clouds were

passing over the city. What they had in store for the people below, however, was far worse than wind and rain.

More numerous than the messengers themselves were their bizarre summons; an expendable army of creatures ranging from the monstrous to the utterly unnatural. Disembodied eyes, encircled by concentric metal rings. Giant bone cubes with mouths on each side, prehensile tongues slithered from each sharp-toothed maw. Round cages filled with hundreds of arms that grasped through the bars at empty air.

There was a pause, as if the messengers were waiting for the residents to look to the sky and panic. That malevolent mercy proved short-lived, with the populace and the city's defenders still scrambling when the messenger army descended. The dome of the city's magical barrier snapped into place as monsters and messengers rained attacks upon it. The faint blue shield shook under the downpour, from projectiles, beams and explosions to the brute force of fists, claws and tentacles.

The defenders hurried to take positions, knowing the dome would not last long. As with Yareh, years earlier, the barrier protecting the city had been designed to repel monster surges, not organised invasion. The messenger force lacked the powerful artefacts that had collapsed the barrier in Yareh, but Segurado was smaller than Yareh, with a commensurately less powerful barrier. The invaders didn't need anything but brutality and time.

The Segurado army managed to assume defensive formations before the barrier began collapsing, but they knew it would do them little good. They were far from elite, and the freakish monster army had them massively outnumbered.

The leader of the Segurado army was General Millicent Marks, an elven adventurer in the classic spellcaster style of her people. She was stationed on the flat roof of the city's highest tower, alongside several other spellcasters. The city's defences didn't stop with the barrier, the tower serving to enhance the range and strength of spells.

"They may be more interested in us than we hoped," she said, looking up at the foes pounding the barrier. "At least we aren't too much of a priority. They've used summons for most of their army, and there aren't lot of gold rankers up there."

"Small mercies," said her second in command. Like most of the people on the southern half of the continent, he was an elf. "Milli, do you think we can hold? Honestly?"

"We have a chance," Millicent said. "But even if the city holds, it's going to burn."

The barrier was designed to hold off monsters while adventurers went out to meet them. No one was foolish enough to take that approach against the merciless and intelligent messengers, as that was asking for death. The most the dome could do for them

was buy time for the populace to reach monster surge bunkers and the Segurado army to take defensive positions. Some took formations on the ground, others in the air. A few took positions in defensive emplacements like the magic tower.

Millicent braced herself. She was gold rank and would almost certainly survive the coming battle. But she knew doing so would involve leaving her subordinates, the city and its people to a grim fate. She wondered if it might not be better to stand her ground and go down fighting.

Silver and gold rankers were hard to kill and good at staying alive, especially adventurers. When messengers won a battle, most of the Pallimustus elites escaped to fight another day. Quite often, those victories came because the messengers were more willing to trade lives than the adventurers. The messengers would fight battles of attrition, going life for life until the armies and the adventurers could no longer tolerate the losses.

Millicent wondered if winning the war required people with the grim resolve to make the same sacrifice. Perhaps what she needed was not to escape but to take as many of them with her as she could. Her emotions wanted her to fight to the bitter end, but she knew it was futile.

While the messengers were outnumbered on Pallimustus, there were more of them in the cosmos than stars in the sky. Battle-ready silver-rank messengers could be grown and trained in batches, for a fraction of the time and resources required to produce an equivalent essence user. If the messengers had a secure and established summoning station anywhere in the area, they could always replenish their numbers.

Millicent closed her eyes, forcing herself to take calming breaths as the barrier started to give way. She only allowed herself a moment of that before snapping her eyes back open. As the barrier collapsed, it didn't crack and shatter like glass. Ripples formed, like the surface of a pond, with holes at the centre of each ripple. Monsters poured through as the ripples kept expanding, running into one another until the barrier fell apart entirely, dissolving like mist.

The enemies that had yet to move plunged downward in a cascade of alien war beasts, with glorious winged warriors following behind. The monsters let out alien howls, spine-tingling shrieks and sounds that no living thing should be able to produce. The bone cubes let out noises like the grinding of teeth, amplified through a bullhorn. Other made sounds like metal shearing and warping.

Their collective auras came down like a hammer. The emotions of the summons were clear, if largely incomprehensible. There was an alien malice, drowned in the madness of minds fundamentally different from ordinary people, or even most monsters. As for the

messengers, only the silver rankers were readable, and only to gold rankers like Millicent. They held no hatred, only superiority, purpose and obedience. She couldn't read their minds, but their emotions suggested they had few thoughts not given to them by their distant kings.

Millicent could also sense the emotions of her fellow defenders, and the populace they were defending. Both were filled with despair that reflected Millicent's own. Few had any hope, and the little to be found was dying fast.

Then something changed. Millicent wasn't sure what, at first, but the reaction from the enemy was evident, immediate and extreme. Their descent stopped instantly, like a snap-frozen waterfall. Their auras roiled, a mix of fear, fury and confusion striking the messengers.

Millicent hadn't known, until that moment, that fear was something they could even feel. She'd heard stories of captured messengers defying torture to the last scrap of life. As for the summons, she'd never sensed anything from their auras before than gibbering madness. They were suddenly coherent, focused on something high above, like a mouse watching a perched owl. The sudden change was unsettling, even with the relief that their attention was no longer on the city.

Millicent was immediately sure that something had appeared above the messengers. She couldn't get a good read on it through the storm of enemy auras, and there were too many to see past. Then an aura cut through everything, and she knew immediately that it was responsible for whatever had just happened to the messengers.

The aura was gold rank and far too powerful to come from a person. She'd sensed aura amplification like this before, built into the defences from major churches. It wasn't a god's aura, but not quite that of a mortal's either. In any case, there was no temple in the sky above the city, last time she checked. Then she realised she had sensed something like it. Just once, very briefly. Every essence user had, in that strange moment when the system first appeared. What that meant, she had no idea, but in a city starved of hope, she'd take it.

Whomever or whatever that aura belonged to, she could feel the messengers trying and failing to suppress it. It was oppressive, yet benevolent, like the protection of a dictator. While that was certainly worrying, at that moment it was good enough.

She was looking up, trying to see past the throng of enemies. The summons had always been a chaotic mess, but now they were a maelstrom of activity, dashing around and sometimes even fighting one another. They were fighting something else too, as were the messengers, but Millicent couldn't see what it was yet.

Millicent tapped the collar on her neck. Communication systems had advanced in leaps and bounds over that last decade, and she could use the collar to speak to all her troops at once.

“Whoever is up there,” she announced, “they’re battling the messengers. I don’t know if they’re fighting for us, but they’re fighting, and I won’t let them do it alone. All squads capable of air combat, go full assault. Right now.”

Wind gusted around Millicent, picking her up and carrying her into the sky. She didn’t allow herself to get carried away, letting the more defensive elements of her forces lead the way. Not only was she a ranged fighter but she needed to keep a broader view of the battle. This warred with her desire to launch forward and discover the nature of their mysterious reinforcements, but she was an experienced commander and knew what rashness would cost.

The Segurado army assaulted what was now the rear of the distracted messenger forces. It was still unclear who or what was above them, but Millicent delighted at the distracted enemy. As she unloaded her powerful wind magic, she got her first sense of their presumed allies as she felt other essence users manipulate the wind. One worked similarly to Millicent, creating storm-like destruction over a wide area. Another was much more personal, passing unharmed through the magical storms at speeds Millicent could only sense, not see directly.

She started spotting what had to be adventurers as they took the fight to the messengers. A man in rainbow armour ploughed through the messenger forces with seeming impunity, on the back of some shape-shifting creature. One moment it was an eagle ripping the wings from messengers with its talons. The next, it was a floating slime that absorbed and disintegrated the messenger summons. The man riding it swung a massive sword from which waves of force erupted out, striking the clustered summons like a hurricane hitting mosquitos.

More presumed allies appeared, all apparently gold rank. Several were flying around inside a tortoise shell whose upper and lower halves were connected at the corners but otherwise open-sided. Multiple spellcasters and healers appeared to be operating from within, protected by the strange vehicle. Millicent watched several attacks fired at the open sides blocked by shell that grew up to shield them before retracting again.

A massive set of spinning wheels appeared in the sky, lined up next to one another like giant slices of sausage. They had symbols on them and occasionally the wheels would stop and fire off various effects. Some buffed and healed their allies, both the new adventurers and Millicent’s forces, even those still on the ground. At other times, the

wheels launched a dazzling variety of magical attacks at the enemy, from waters jets and fireballs to crippling debuffs. The more wheels with matching symbols, the stronger the effect and the more people were affected.

One oddity she noticed was the presence of butterflies across the battlefield, glowing blue and orange. The messengers avoided the beautiful creatures as if they were death incarnate, launching attacks at the butterflies to keep them away. It didn't seem to help much, as the struck butterflies exploded into clouds of sparks. The clouds then sought out enemies, mostly finding the less wary summons.

Wherever the clouds landed, the victims immediately started to rot horrifically, even the ones that weren't flesh. Those touched by the butterflies had a similar, but much slower effect. They started to produce more butterflies, however, that grew out of their bodies and flew off in search of more victims.

As the messenger forces lost cohesion and their numbers fell, Millicent was able to identify more of what she hoped were allies. Each one seemed to be not just a gold ranker but a gold rank elite. The messengers evaporated in front of them like morning mist before the sun. Millicent was finally able to spot the source of the massive aura, floating in the sky. It looked like an eyeball the size of a castle estate, everything but the blue and orange iris encased in dark red armour. Floating around the iris were smaller but otherwise identical orbs, each one the size of a house. These smaller orbs were the source of the butterflies, which poured out of them like water spilling off a cliff.

The messengers were not fighting tactically, for which Millicent was glad. They seemed obsessed with one of the combatants, either fleeing from him or chasing after him with wild-eyed fury. The man had a dark cloak with shadow arms sprouting from it, like the branches of a macabre tree. She heard more than one of the frenzied attackers screaming 'heretic king,' whatever that meant. Explanations could wait until after the fighting was done.

Still throwing out spells, Millicent watched what was quickly turning into a massacre. The messengers were caught between her forces and these newcomers, small in number but great in power. With the messengers barely paying attention to them, the Segurado army made them pay, while safely evacuating their injured to the healers.

By the time the battle was over, dead messengers scattered across the city below. The visiting adventurers had made them lootable and left them for her people to collect, rainbow smoke raising as messengers turned into magical weapons and supplies that would undoubtedly be put to good use.

Millicent hadn't suffered a single death amongst her forces. There had been a couple of close calls, but more than once a shield had snapped into place right before one of her people had suffered a killing blow. Only a short time ago, she had been contemplating whether to die fighting in defence of her home. Now, the invaders were dead, and her people were safe.

She had some profound thanks to give.