

Chapter 671

The Better Adventurer

One building on the Adventure Society campus of Yaresh was older than all of the others. It had been the entire headquarters for the Adventure Society in the early days of the city, and the defensive measures built into it were formidable. As Yaresh grew, and its branch expanded from a building to a full campus, the building and its defences had been repurposed. It now served as a set of secure residences, for those who needed to be kept safe, along with those who needed to be kept secure, but the campus prison tower was not appropriate. This was the case for Zolit Kreen.

Zolit was not just an outworlder but one that had originally been a valash; a species that did not natively appear on Pallimustus and looked like a humanoid chihuahua. Both of these things made him very attention-grabbing, and he had spent years working very hard to undo that damage. Zolit had been a run-of-the-mill adventurer by intention, slowly but surely ranking up to silver while remaining as unremarkable as he could. He did his part during the monster surges while doing his best not to stand out.

After attaining the wealth and extended lifespan that came with being silver rank, he'd retired and found a comfortable niche as a fight promoter. It was an environment where everyone was a little bit strange, looking for a gimmick so his idiosyncrasies didn't stand out as much. Everyone had their thing, and being a valash outworlder was his.

It had all gone wrong the moment he set eyes on the other outworlder. He'd become complacent, forgetting the importance of being ordinary. The next thing he knew, Adventure Society enforcers were dragging him out of bed in the middle of the night and locking him up in an admittedly lavish suite that was, nonetheless, a prison. They were asking him about the outworlder and, for some reason, his assistant, Benella. They were talking nonsense about messengers and Zolit had no answers to give.

What was worse was that he was starting to feel ill and he didn't have any more of his medicine. One of the problems with not being native to this world was that there was an incompatibility between himself and the magic of Pallimustus. It was something he was sensitive about, as he was always wary of the Adventure Society grabbing him and handing him over to the Magic Society for experimentation. He'd decided to reach out to the other outworlder about it, except that he didn't get the chance. Benella disappeared and he'd been snatched up by the Adventure Society.

Benella's disappearance had been the biggest problem as she had been the one procuring his medicine for years. He didn't know which alchemist she used or what exactly

was in the medicine; it was one of countless things he'd relied on her for in the early days. His memories of that time were hazy at best, and the ones from his old world were gone entirely. This was another side effect of the magic incompatibility for outworlders, according to the expert Benella had found.

Zolit groaned, pacing around in the secure but opulent suite, barely dressed. For as long as he could remember, Benella had been managing his life. Without her help in the beginning, when he didn't even speak the language and his magic incompatibility kept leading to blackouts, he never would have managed at all.

Now she was gone, and some kind of traitor? She was the main thing that the Adventure Society interrogators asked about. They didn't call themselves interrogators, but that's what they were. And Zolit was terrified to talk about his medicine lest they turn their attentions on him rather than her. Or worse, hand him over to the Magic Society. They might claim that they didn't do unethical research on innocent people, but he knew what obsessed researchers did behind closed doors. It was one of the main things Benella had warned him about in the early days.

He needed them to let him go so that he could track down the medicine for himself. He was feeling worse and worse by the hour, his thoughts increasingly scattered. He couldn't sit still and his body was releasing sticky sweat. He shouldn't sweat at all, as a silver ranker, let alone this strange, tacky substance. Three showers with little more than an hour between, scrubbing the residue from his body. He should ask for some crystal wash, but he didn't want to draw attention to his condition.

Sleep wouldn't come, his mind racing and scattered. He was hungry, too, more and more as the night moved into the early hours of morning. At least they were feeding him properly, and he'd just asked for another meal.

An Adventure Society functionary, Argrave Mericulato, pushed a trolley of food down a hall of the secure residence building. His aura mask hid the seething anger that was always inside of him at being reduced to such menial tasks, while he kept his expression easy and friendly. He never used to suppress his emotions, but it was something he had to learn. Fortunately, no one paid that much attention to servants, which was what he amounted to, in spite of his silver rank.

He wasn't a traitor. Any reasonable person would see that the Adventure Society were the traitors, having been the ones to turn on him. They didn't care that he had been a celebrated adventurer in his own right; the moment his father had died in the One Day

War, everyone had turned on him. They treated him as if only his father had any value, ignoring his own accomplishments.

His team had just up and left. It wasn't his fault that the right tactical decision in the moment was to make a strategic withdrawal without them. He was the most important team member, so obviously they should be the distraction that let him go to safety. There was a flying attack fortress, gold and diamond rankers battling about, and the dimensional pocket device his father had given him only had room for one. His father had died in that battle, so waiting it out in safety was the responsible move, for the family. Not that his sister saw it that way.

The team hadn't even come looking for him in the aftermath. They left Rimaros almost immediately, pausing only long enough to have him listed as missing, presumed dead. The pocket dimension device had messed up his tracking stone and they didn't even come looking to confirm. Instead, they had him formally struck off their team list. By the time he went through the massive amount of paperwork to get himself re-listed as alive, they had a new team member. They had refused every water link request and sent him a letter that read 'Sorry: team full.'

Four years together and they ended it with three words. Years of treating him like a prince, only to reveal their true faces the moment they heard about his father. Finding another team should have been easy, and it had been the first time. Once they heard his now-dead father's name. How was Argrave to know that the incompetents would demand too much, and then blame their failures on him?

After that, teams had been harder to come by, even with so many looking to fill slots in the wake of the monster surge. It was not Argrave's fault that these pathetic adventurers didn't understand how to properly support what should obviously be the new core of their team. Four teams, none of them worth a single damn.

The Adventure Society was worse than no help. Time and again, Argrave went to them with the perfectly reasonable demand of being placed on a team that was worthy of him. And each time, the society was duped, bamboozled by the lying teams that sought only to cover their own incompetence. With each new team that scapegoated him, Argrave's eloquent arguments fell on increasingly deaf ears until he was forced to move on, looking for an Adventure Society branch that wasn't full of idiots.

Unfortunately, idiots flocked together. He moved south, from one branch to another, encountering nothing but fools, incompetents and those who undermined him out of jealousy. They went so far as to poison his name so that each branch already knew of the teams he'd been in, along with the lies they'd told. But did they listen to what really

happened? Of course not. The simple-minded fools believed the first thing they heard and were too stupid to recognise the truth when they heard it.

It was in Yaresh that Argrave realised that he was the one who had been the fool. He should have realised from the start that it wasn't a few bad apples. The entire Adventure Society was made up of petty idiots, saddling him with one pathetic team after another because they were jealous of his talent. They knew they would never reach his potential, leaving him no choice but to roam from one branch to the next, looking for honest people.

Finally, he was forced to admit that there were no good people in the Adventure Society. If they had even a scrap of Argrave's potential they would be adventurers themselves, not bureaucrats using their petty power to bring down their betters. But even in bad teams, Argrave's light was too bright to hide. In the end, they had to strip him of his status as an adventurer, denying him the chance to shine.

Adding insult to injury, they had the temerity to offer him the role of a menial functionary that he only took due to his financial needs. It was not cheap to travel in the manner he deserved, and his pathetic sister had cut him off before their father's body had turned to rainbow smoke. It wouldn't surprise him if the bureaucrats knew this and took shameless advantage.

Argrave did not betray the Adventure Society because that wasn't possible. The Adventure Society betrayed him first. Every snub, every team member who didn't understand how to properly support the hero their team had been graced with. He came into these groups who had lost a member in the surge, and it was little surprise they had. And when he told them as much, they had the gall to get angry at *him*.

The messengers understood his value. He'd only met one briefly, when his aura mask had been applied, and the intimidating being had been brusque, it was true. But they were from beyond the borders of the world and radiated glory; they would learn that Argrave was glorious too. It was only a matter of time until they realised and Argrave stood among them. Their philosophy of superiority resonated with him, and finally, there would be someone to recognise that some people were just better than others.

Of course, being from another world, they would need to see his superiority in action. He had leapt at the chance to use the menial task the Adventure Society had given him, as what had meant to be a humiliation would be the instrument through which he would prove his greatness. They had tried to make him a servant, but the cream would always rise to the top, and there was nothing they could do to stop it.

The fool guard was one of the Adventure Society enforcers who clearly couldn't hack it as a real adventurer. His senses swept rudely over Argrave but didn't penetrate the aura

mask. It was more proof of which of them was the better adventurer, not that any more was needed. The guard looked Argrave over and gestured at him to stop the cart and checked each of the covered trays.

“He’s agitated again,” the guard said. “He hasn’t slept at all, and I think he might be sick. We’re waiting on a healer, but the priority is some kind of evacuee camp. The messengers did something to the towns south of the city. I’d advise leaving the cart and getting out quick.”

Argrave swallowed a retort about the guard looking after himself and instead gave him a smile.

“Thanks for the warning,” he replied. The guard opened the door to let him wheel the trolley in, closing the door behind him.

Through the door was a well-appointed room containing a creature that Argrave found disgusting, but he plastered on a smile. The tiny man with the emaciated dog head was unpleasant to look at, but Argrave didn’t let his disgust show. Fortunately, the aura mask meant he only needed to school his expression.

“Hello again, Zolit,” he greeted.

The agitated little man was in a visibly unhealthy state. He had been pacing around the room wearing shorts and a robe left hanging open. His skin was glistening and he looked sticky, although whether that was natural for whatever he was or some odd condition, Argrave didn’t know. He didn’t particularly care, either.

Zolit ignored him, moving to the cart and lifting lids from trays that he awkwardly picked up all together before moving them to a table, spilling bits of food as he went. Argrave shook his head as he watched Zolit sit down, facing the other direction. The idiot could have had him move the trolley to the table and transfer the trays across neatly, but it worked out well for Argrave’s own plans. He opened the narrow panel hidden on one of the trolley legs and withdrew a long needle.

Zolit didn't turn as Argrave approached. The little man was shoving food into his mouth in an agitated frenzy, only letting out a muffled yell as Argrave's hand slipped over his mouth. Argrave jammed the needle into Zolit’s spine, through the slats in the back of the dining chair.

To Argrave’s complete startlement, Zolit shrank to the size of a marble in the time would have taken to snap his fingers, with a wet sucking-slapping sound. The marble fell to the chair and rolled onto the floor.

Argrave turned to look at the door but the guard outside did not make an appearance. The thick walls and heavy doors of the building had long-standing enchantments to

prevent eavesdropping. After waiting an extra moment, just in case, he moved to where the tiny sphere had settled in the carpet and leaned over to peer at it.

He'd been told that the device he was given would make it possible to take Zolit away, but he'd been expecting it to knock the little man out and turn him invisible, allowing Argrave to wheel him out on the cart. Having the man turn into a tiny brown ball was certainly more convenient, although he would have appreciated a warning.

He reached down to pick the ball up and discovered it was astoundingly heavy. Not too much for his silver-rank strength to lift, but the marble-sized object weighed as much as a heavy person. He'd have to keep hold of it as it would weigh down any pocket enough to be glaringly obvious and he hadn't been allowed to bring a dimensional bag.

Argrave held the orb up in front of his face, peering closely. It was warm and leathery to the touch, looking like it was made of tiny leather strips wrapped around one another. Jason would have recognised it as a tiny version of the orb the messenger had used to ward off the world-taker worms.

The door opened and the guard stepped inside.

"You really shouldn't linger... where's Kreen?"

"Uh, shower. He was all sticky with something and wanted to wash it off."

"Yeah, I told you he was sick. He's been showering every few hours. What's that thing you're holding?"

Argrave had done his best to casually move the hand holding the tiny sphere casually to his side, but he'd been peering closely at it when the door was opened, so the guard plainly saw it.

"Just a personal keepsake," Argrave told him, but saw that there was an unfortunate limit to the guard's credulity. The guard placed a hand on his sword hilt and took a wary stance.

"Step back into the middle of the room, Merculato."

"I don't think—"

The guard drew his sword.

"Step back into the middle of the room. I won't ask again."

Argrave did as instructed, moving into the lounge area as his mind scrambled for an appropriate response. He would need to take out the guard quietly and get off-campus before anyone realised. As he was thinking, the guard moved into the room and checked the only other door, which led into the bathroom. He saw that it was empty and levelled his sword at Argrave, touching his hand to a brooch on his chest at the same time.

“Where is Kreen?” the guard demanded. “And what was that thing you were looking at?”

“Oh, this?” Argrave asked, holding up the sphere between his thumb and forefinger. He was careful not to let the guard see how heavy it was, then tossed it at him. The guard moved to intercept it with his sword but the sphere stopped dead, floating in the air between them.

“What is...”

“What the...”

The orb started to grow and pulsate. It looked as if a tiny creature was rapidly growing inside a leathery egg, trying to claw its way out. For all either man knew, that's exactly what was happening. The guard brought his sword down on the sphere and it slid off, not so much as budging it. The growing orb started emitting an aura, silver and weak but rapidly growing stronger.

“I think we might need to get out of here,” Argrave said.

“What is it?”

“I don't know, but I don't want to stay and find out.”

“You're not going anywhere.”

The sphere had grown to the size of a basketball and started glowing faintly with golden light as the aura transitioned from silver to gold. The surface of it, still covered in leathery strands, was writhing and undulating.

“I really think we need to...”

Argrave trailed off as something started pushing its way out of the orb. On opposite sides, each facing one of the two men in the room, something scaly was shoving through the leathery strands. Argrave chanted a quick spell as the guard swung his sword a gain. From either side of the orb, snakes shot out. The sword bow and Argrave's firebolt glanced off harmlessly and the snakes latched their fangs into the two men.

Chapter 672

Brave Because It Can Win

As the night moved closer to dawn, the most likely time for a messenger attack grew imminent. Jason floated, cross-legged and eyes closed, over the roof of the cloud hospital as he projected his senses through the Shade bodies scattered around the city. His eyes shot open when he noticed something approaching the cloud house. He was alarmed because all he sensed was a small dead spot within his perception, subtle enough that he'd almost missed it entirely.

Jason unfolded his legs, dropped his feet to the roof from where he was floating above it and dashed to the edge. What he spotted below was Taika standing with another man at the edge of the camp, both looking up at him. Jason focused his senses, hearing the other man laugh.

"You're right," the man told Taika. "He does have sharp senses."

Astoundingly, the man was a head taller than even the mountainous Taika. His hair was a golden mane with long sideburns, while his eyes were green and sharp. He had craggy features and a hawk nose, with none of the polished perfection typical of high rankers. None of his massive physique was fat but he was a slab of a man, more powerlifter than bodybuilder.

The man was bare-chested and bare-footed, with loose, rough pants held in place by a piece of rope used as a belt. Hanging from the belt was a gourd and he held a closed umbrella, slung over one shoulder.

Jason leapt off the roof, using his aura to slow himself as he approached the ground and lightly land in front of the two men. Jason had picked up a few extra centimetres from ranking up, but in front of Taika and the stranger, he looked like a 50% scale model.

"G'day, I'm Jason."

No one around them cared about Jason, even after he'd leapt from the roof. The camp workers were busy and the evacuees had more on their minds than some adventurer. As for Taika's companion, Jason was entirely confident that lying was pointless. There was little point trying to be less prominent when Jason's instincts screamed that this man was an absolute powerhouse.

"Haliastur," the man introduced himself in a rumbling voice. "You've got quite the odd friend here, Taika."

"And here was me about to say the same thing," Jason said. The man in front of him did not register on Jason's magical senses at all, to the point that he suspected the man

only revealed himself at all as a test. Even so, there was a presence to him that transcended auras and magic. For most, that would be something that didn't consciously register, but Jason recognised the sensation.

Jason had encountered diamond rankers, gods and great astral beings enough that he had a decent sense of what he was dealing with when encountering entities vastly above his own power level. This was true even when their auras were far beyond his ability to read; there was something about their presence they couldn't entirely hide. Consciously recognising it was there required the kind of regular exposure that very few people below diamond rank had. Most would pass it off as inherent charisma, or some kind of subtle aura manipulation, if they noticed it at all.

Jason had come to think of it as a transcendent presence, but that didn't mean it only belonged to transcendent beings like gods and great astral beings. Both Shako and Dawn displayed it, and Jason suspected that he himself had the barest skerrick from his nature as an astral king. But neither Zila nor Soramir Rimaros had it, suggesting that the key was to touch the transcendent. That was something most essence users would only do at the peak of diamond.

This man had it as well, and Jason gauged him to be roughly on Dawn's power level, although that was admittedly a guess. His measure of transcendent presence was still crude and operating from an extremely low vantage point. Another guess Jason had about the man was that he was not an essence user.

Jason was certain that Haliastur saw through him while he saw very little. The man confirmed as much immediately.

"Blessing of the Reaper. Blessing of the World-Phoenix. Astral king, that's an odd one. You're the one building that half-assembled dimensional bridge between this world and some other one. Jumping on the back of the link that idiot Builder got himself sanctioned over. And you're the one Shade is attached to right now."

Shade emerged from Jason's shadow.

"Good day, Haliastur."

"Shade. I thought you might be embarrassed to show yourself after getting bound to some astral space for a few centuries."

"You've been talking to Umber. Shame is something you have for your choices, where I have no embarrassment over mine, even when the outcomes were not what I had hoped for."

"A healthy attitude."

"You two have met, then," Jason said.

“We have,” Haliastur said. “It’s a big cosmos, but the most powerful in any given region are relatively few in number and immortal, so we all meet eventually. Once you get to diamond rank, Shade can guide you to Interstice. I’ll introduce you around.”

“Interstice. That’s the cosmic city-universe, right?”

“Yes.”

“And what brings you to this world?” Jason asked. “Is this something to do with the former First Sister of the World Phoenix? She already left.”

Haliastur raised his eyebrows.

“Little Dawnie was here? What for?”

“Him,” Taika said, nodding at Jason.

“I’m just another pawn the World-Phoenix pushed into place,” Jason said.

“I imagine you’re not used to people seeing through your lies,” Haliastur said, his voice showing no signs of taking offence. “How does a silver-ranker know Dawn?”

“He more than knows her,” Taika interjected. “He...”

Taika’s chocolate skin turned milk chocolate as he paled under Jason’s glare.

“...knows her quite well,” he finished lamely. Haliastur glanced at Taika with another chuckle.

“How did you and Taika meet?” Jason asked.

“How did you and Dawn meet?” Haliastur countered.

“The World-Phoenix sent her to make me save the world. Not this one. The one at the other end of that link.”

“And did you?”

“Twice. Working on a third time, which should be the end of it.”

“The bridge.”

“Yep.”

“It’s an incomplete mess.”

“Tell me about it. I don’t suppose you know how to finish it?”

“I do not.”

“I guess it’s back to the plan of beating astral magic out of the messengers.”

Haliastur threw back his head and let out a laugh that felt like an earthquake.

“I like you, Jason Asano. You have a fun friend here, Taika.”

“And how did you meet?”

“I’ve been looking for something for a couple of decades. I think it’s in this city. I came across Taika and saw him using his powers. I happened to have some insights I thought he could use, so I introduced myself. It turns out that we get along quite well.”

"This thing you're looking for," Jason said. "Is it a threat?"

"Oh, yes," Haliastur said, then gestured at the camp. "You've seen that the messengers like to use apocalypse beasts as indiscriminate weapons."

"Unfortunately," Jason said.

"You will find that what they have done here is not unique. Such disasters are being launched all over this world. They aren't likely to actually cause an apocalypse, as the messengers know better than to use something that they can't control."

"I get the impression that they dislike an absence of control."

"Very true. But they will cause considerable damage and something could easily get out of hand. I have been pursuing one of these apocalypse beasts for a little time now, as I said. Have you ever heard of a naga genesis egg?"

"No," Jason said. "Shade?"

"I know of it by reputation," Shade said. "My understanding is that it consumes flesh and converts it into a serpent race called the naga. It can wipe out an entire world, replacing it with the serpent people."

"We have myths about them in my world," Jason said. "Not the egg bit, that I've heard of, but the serpent people. What we really need is..."

Jason looked to Taika, thinking about his confluence essence. How would Haliastur, who Jason was convinced was not an essence user, be able to help Taika, who was? He looked at Haliastur, the gourd at his belt and the umbrella slung over his shoulder. Haliastur, who had been chasing a naga egg for decades.

"I don't suppose that there's amrita in that gourd?" Jason asked.

Haliastur let out another laugh.

"Amrita?" Taika asked. "I have an essence ability called that."

"Your friend here has figured me out," Haliastur told him.

"Are you going to help us?" Jason asked.

"I am here for the naga egg, which is not so slight a thing as world-taker worms. I do not know how they've been keeping it dormant or hidden, but if it becomes active, removing it will be help enough, believe me."

"I do," Jason said. "If it comes to—"

Jason and Haliastur both turned towards the centre of the city with stern expressions.

"What is it?" Taika asked. He wasn't quite silver yet, and even if he had been, would not match the aura senses of either of the others.

"Some manner of aura burst," Haliastur said. "It started at silver rank and grew to gold very quickly. I believe it is the egg."

"I know that aura," Jason said. "Or I did before it became warped and turned gold. It belonged to another outworlder. He used to be a valash."

Haliastur's eyes went wide.

"So that's how they did it."

"Meaning?" Jason asked.

"I think that the messengers took a soul, modified it, wrapped it around the egg and shoved the egg into this world. Artificially creating an outworlder whose soul served as a barrier to contain the egg."

"Can they do that to a soul?"

"Difficult. But possible, if you're willing to perform soul engineering, which most are not, and you have access to messenger astral magic. One of their astral kings could do it if they intervened personally. A proper astral king, not a baby one like you."

"Where do they get the soul? It would have to be a volunteer or they couldn't touch it, right?"

"Yes, but you can torture someone's soul until they become a volunteer."

"I'm familiar with the process."

Haliastur looked Jason up and down again.

"So I see."

"I once saw a disembodied soul used as a magical barrier."

Haliastur nodded.

"Soul engineering. It can be used for various purposes. Where did you see something like that?"

"An astral space that used to be an astral vessel of the Builder, until the Reaper's people stole it."

"You live an interesting life."

"Something tells me that tedium isn't a problem for you, either. Why aren't you rushing over to where that aura surge was?"

"The egg is awakening. If it senses my presence while it is still taking its initial form it will panic and expend all of its gathered power immediately. That will cut off its potential for overrunning this world, but flood the city with serpents. The people of this city will die before I can stop them all."

"So, you let it grow up into a monster brave enough to take you on and then kill it?"

"That is the idea."

"Uh, what if it's brave because it can win?" Taika asked.

"It can't," Jason and Haliastur said simultaneously. Haliastur grinned.

“That should be long enough,” he said. “Genesis eggs experience explosive growth. I will try to minimise the damage to the city, but you should stay clear.”

“Oh, that’s all you, bloke. If that thing is kicking off, the messenger attack probably isn’t far behind.”

Haliastur launched into the air, transforming into a golden bird.

“What the hell is that bloke?” Taika asked. “And why were you so sure he can win?”

“He’s a garuda. Or *the* garuda; I don’t know how the real thing differs from the myths. But garuda is the devourer of serpents. Naga in particular, which is how I figured out what he is.”

“Garuda is my confluence essence.”

“Yep. That’s why your new meditation technique works so well.”

“That’s pretty sweet, bro. I do have one question, though.”

“What’s that?” Jason asked.

“What’s a garuda?”

Jason turned to look at him.

“Seriously? You have the garuda confluence and you don’t know what a garuda is?”

“I got an ability from it called Feaster of Serpents, so I thought it was a specialty chef thing.”

“A chef thing? Why would you think that?”

“Your sister has chef powers.”

“My sister’s a chef! What other powers did you get from that confluence?”

“Amrita. It summons a jar of stuff to drink.”

“Okay, that’s fair. What else?”

“One is called Brother of the Dawn. Unbowed is the one I got with the garuda essence.”

“They don’t sound very culinary. What about the last one?”

“It’s called God-Striking Fist.”

“God-Striking Fist?”

“Yep.”

“And you thought it was some kind of cooking confluence?”

“You never know with awakening stones. I thought it might be an *Iron Chef* thing.”

“What awakening stone did you use to get that?”

“Defiance.”

“You thought an awakening stone of defiance gave you an ability from a chef-type essence called God-Striking Fist?”

“Some of those chefs are pretty rough. What about that bloke who swears all the time?”

“Taika?”

“Yeah, bro?”

“By any chance, did it just reach the point where it been long enough since you got your essences that you were too embarrassed to ask what your confluence was about?”

Taika bowed his head.

“Yeah, bro.”

Jason gave a good-natured chuckle, reached up to pat his shoulder, gave up and patted him on the bicep.

“That’s nothing to be ashamed of, mate. You have no idea how many times I’ve ended up looking like an idiot.”

“Sure I do. I know your sister pretty well.”

Jason groaned.

“Mr Asano,” Shade said.

“Yeah, what’s up, Shade?”

“Messengers have just been spotted by the city scout patrols. The city alarms will be activated very soon, so it is time to take down the cloud hospital and establish a bunker.”

“Right,” Jason said. “Let the high priestess know it’s time to evacuate the hospital so I can take it down. I just hope that—”

An explosion sounded in the distance and all heads turned to look towards the centre of the city. Dozens of giant snakes had risen over the city like the heads of a hydra, looming as tall as the city's towers. Light from the towers lit the snakes in ominous silhouette, making their visage all the more menacing.

“...something like that doesn’t happen.”

As they watched, another monstrous form grew up to the size of a building. It was roughly humanoid but with an eagle’s head, four arms and golden wings spread out from its back. It was draped in golden robes and its skin was emerald green. One hand was holding an umbrella and the other was holding a gourd.

“Bro, I can turn into something like that. I can’t get big like that, though. Do you think I will after I rank up?”

Despite the spectacle in the distance, Jason turned to look at Taika.

“You thought it was a chef essence?”

“That power is from the wing essence, bro. Calm down.”

“Taika?”

“Yeah bro?”

“Have you been messing with me this whole time?”

“Yeah, bro.”

“Seriously?”

“Did you really think I believed that garuda was a Gordon Ramsey essence? How dumb do you think I am? It’s a little hurtful, bro.”

Chapter 673

A Man That Will Inspire Courage

The crash of wood smashing apart and stone being pulverised filled the air with noise, dust and splinters as Jason dashed through it. He dodged falling sections of ceiling and leapt through holes in once-intact walls, his cloak deflecting much of the debris filling the air.

“You’ll try to avoid damaging the city my arse,” he grumbled, his voice lost in the noise.

Outside of the central city area, most of the architecture in Yareh was built with living trees as a core, moulded into elaborate shapes and supplemented with brickwork. The trees were usually of the magic variety, outside of the poorer districts, and held up to impacts very well. This was important when some of them were being ripped out of the ground, used as crude clubs and tossed around.

The building-sized garuda, Haliastur, was savaging what looked like an even larger hydra whose main body was an arena-sized orb and whose heads counted in the dozens. Prehensile necks were grabbing whole tree building and launching them at the garuda, who deflected them away. They bounced into other buildings, chunks bouncing off to inflict more damage as they broke apart.

The results were that the evacuation of people in the area was not going well and the casualties were mounting. Adventurers were rushing in to get people out alive, but the adventurers themselves were facing casualties. The closer anyone came to a fight between diamond rankers, the more the difference between life and death became luck. The spreading disaster zone at the heart of the city was an ample demonstration of that.

The unconventional structure of the tree buildings held up better than traditional designs, at least at first. Once their integrity was finally compromised, however, they collapsed much faster. Jason rushed through a building that was crumbling under the weight of most of another building, tracking civilians with his aura senses. He found them huddling under a table as he dashed into the room, watching the ceiling collapse.

Pushing his silver-rank speed to the limit, he launched himself across the room. He kicked away the table that would not shelter the woman and two boys from tons of stone and wood. Standing over them and spreading his cloak wide, he pushed against the falling ceiling with his aura, which wasn’t close to strong enough.

His aura slowed the fall only a little, but it was just enough for Jason to interpose himself between the ceiling and the people as it slammed into his back. His legs almost

buckled but managed to barely hold, trembling at the weight. He formed a shelter for the people he was leaning over, his cloak draped around him. Cloud stuff emerged from the bottle hanging around his neck, plugging the gaps between his cloak and the floor, filtering out stone dust and splinters.

“HUMP!” Jason bellowed, his voice carried on his aura to boom through the building, overwhelming even the sounds of destruction. Moments later, the weight threatening to push Jason down grew lighter as huge chunks of brickwork and broken tree trunk were tossed away.

Humphrey was racing against time as the floor under Jason and the civilians threatened to give way, just as the ceiling above had. As he had to be careful not to bring even more of the ceiling down, it was a race that Humphrey lost. The children let out startled screams as the floor fell out of under them and they were grabbed in a net of shadow arms, dangling over the hole now below them. Finally, Humphrey cleared out enough space that Jason could hand the children up to him.

Humphrey took the kids and Jason the mother as they leapt from the building that continued to crumble like a biscuit behind them. It was a tall residential treehouse, which was how it had caught debris from the diamond rank battle taking place in the distance. Humphrey had a kid slung under each arm, flying clear with his conjured dragon wings. Jason held the mother using shadow arms while his cloak spread out into wings of darkness, speckled with stars.

They flew into an area where they had set up a staging point in an open market. It left them somewhat exposed to debris thrown off by the diamond-rank battle in the distance, but there were no buildings tall enough to tumble onto it.

The staging area was covered by a dome of shimmering pale blue energy set up by Clive. Inside was Clive’s portal, through which civilians were being sent to the nearest monster attack bunker. The dome had no chance of stopping the larger chunks of rubble and collapsing building, but could keep out choking dust and at least some of the smaller debris.

“If I had a portal instead of a teleport, I could do more,” Humphrey complained.

“Say that when a building is about to fall on a bunch of people and you teleport them all out. Portals aren’t fast enough to do that.”

They didn’t have time to stop for banter and left after that quick exchange. Jason shadow-jumped through a Shade body and Humphrey leapt away as if shot from a cannon.

There was another portal site shielded by Clive's rituals, this one with Jason's portal. This allowed the team to spread out, giving them two options for where to take the people they found or rescued. Until messengers attacked and made it into the city, the team was spreading out, operating alone but with others close enough to offer backup at need.

Each team member had their own specialties, and they used voice chat to call in the right person for any job. Humphrey's strength and ability to fly were obviously useful, and he was able to dig out trapped people the easiest. The ability to teleport into spaces that he could see but not access was also a boon. Neil had the strength but not the flight, but his ability to shield and heal made him arguably the team's most critical member.

Sophie, Rufus and Jason all used their excellent mobility for rapid response. Sophie's speed meant that she could get to the people most in need while Rufus could use his two short-range teleports, Moonlit Step and Flash step, to navigate buildings in the process of collapsing. Jason's biggest advantage was that his aura senses could pick people out that the others might have missed. In all the chaos, it was easy to overlook normal-rank people whose weak auras were on the verge of winking out. But Jason was able to track them down and feed them a potion, get them to Neil or both.

Clive was in charge of watching the bigger picture and focused on maintaining the extraction areas around his and Jason's portals. He had set up as many rituals as he could cram into the area without them interfering with one another. Mostly they were designed to shield the people from the smaller things that were harmless to a silver ranker but could still harm normal people.

Belinda's role was to assess and extract people from the trickiest situations. Her versatile skill set and power selection meant that she had the best toolkit for the trickiest work. Many civilians were trapped under rubble that was difficult to extract them from. Some were in danger of it collapsing on them while others were injured and almost any shift could kill them. Belinda assessed their needs and either extracted them herself or called in the right team member to help.

The one Belinda called on the most was Gordon, whose pinpoint beams were ideal for cutting through debris. All of the familiars were proving their worth, either subsumed into their summoner or actively taking part. Belinda's astral lantern familiar was inside her, allowing her to use eye beams similar to Gordon's. They couldn't cut away debris as fast as Gordon's half dozen powerful beams, but for delicate work, they were ideal.

Stash, like Belinda, was incredibly versatile. For clearing heavy rubble he used the form of a fifteen-foot gorilla with a face on its chest and a third arm where its head should have been. For snaking through tight spaces to reach people, he could take the form of a

mouse or, indeed, a snake. From there he could take a form like a dungeon beetle to extract them.

Dungeon beetles were predatory creatures with a very hard and mostly hollow carapace. They were known for taking their prey, entrapping them in their carapace and then burrowing deep underground, letting their prisoners slowly die of thirst before consuming them. As grim as this was, the hollow but very strong body and the burrowing power were ideal for digging people out.

Onslow, Clive's flying tortoise, was flying around the areas furthest from the extraction points. This was where Rufus, Jason and especially Sophie were to be found, and they could hand over civilians to Onslow to be carried to safety. Onslow was able to shuck off his shell which became a large and sturdy flying transport. Without his shell, the rest of him became a tiny and adorable green tortoise-man, which was perfect for calming down scared children.

With large chunks of falling debris bouncing heavily off his shell, keeping people calm was important. Onslow used his elemental powers as best he could, throwing out water barriers and exploding chunks of stone with lightning bolts, but his indiscriminate powers weren't the best for the situation. It was getting people to safety that was his most valuable role.

Colin was still hibernating in Jason's astral realm, with no indication of rousing. Shade, on the other hand, was characteristically valuable. He could scout spaces that even Stash couldn't squeeze into and allowed Jason easy mobility around the zone.

Jason found another group of civilians, trapped at the bottom of a hole. It was just wide enough to pull people out from, but too narrow to go down and get them. This was a problem that simply lowering a rope couldn't solve because the sides of the hole were sharp and jagged. Anyone coming out would require delicate extraction to avoid being lacerated to death on the way.

Jason called on Belinda's echo spirit familiar, Gemini, who could mimic the team's abilities. They both used Jason's ability to call up shadow hands, essentially creating a tunnel of dark hands that could lift the people out while shielding them from the sides of the hole.

"Mr Asano," Shade said.

"What do you need?"

"Both cloud palaces have completed the conversion to bunkers and High Priestess Shavar is ready to start moving evacuees into them."

"Alright. I'll be along as soon as we get these people out."

Once again, Taika felt the frustration of still being bronze rank. He was so close, and if he'd managed to cross that line, then he'd be out in the city instead of playing usher to evacuees as the camp was organised to lead people into the two cloud buildings. Lines of people clustered together, snaking through the camp and leading up to the bunkers.

Emir Bahadir's cloud bunker was the larger of the two by a solid margin. The five-tower configuration of the palace was still echoed in the bunker, which was a smooth dome with five spires jutting up and out at angles, like leaning towers. Spaced evenly around the dome, the spires had a massive ritual diagram floating between them; an elaborate pentagram using the spires as anchor points. Glowing with shifting colours, the brightness of it painted the area in rainbow hues.

Jason's bunker was a pyramid covered in interlocking hexes of matte black, with blue and orange light glimmering in lines between the hex panels. The top of the pyramid did not reach a point and instead formed a cup over which a giant version of one of Jason's eyes floated ominously. Notably, the rainbow light from Emir's palace stopped dead as it approached Jason's, stopping as it hit an invisible wall that shimmered faintly as the rainbow light struck it.

Taika let out a sigh as he looked at the power the two buildings displayed. He was not a man with a hunger for power, but when people needed help, he couldn't help but feel inadequate when confronted with such displays.

"Your frustration is understandable," Hana told him. He had felt her approach as, like him, she was actively using her aura to calm the crowd. These people were only hours from having their towns wiped out by alien horrors and their nerves were raw.

"While this task is not as exciting or dangerous as running through the periphery of a diamond-rank battle," Hana said, "that does not make it unimportant. Panic could easily set in, and that will be a disaster. For all the power I possess, people would get trampled and die before I can restore order. I am grateful for your reliable presence, not just for your aura, but for you."

Ability: [Unbowed] (Garuda)

- **Aura (Boon).**
- **Base cost: None.**
- **Cooldown: None.**

- **Current rank: Silver 0 (0%).**

- Effect (iron): You and allies within your aura have enhanced [Power] attribute and resistances.
 - Effect (bronze): You and allies within your aura gain one or more instances of [Courage] when performing acts of courage within your aura.
 - Effect (silver): Negate the effects of afflictions that penalise attributes or reduce damage inflicted. The afflictions remain in place but do not take effect on you or any ally within the aura.
 - [Courage] (boon, holy, stacking): Negate the next instance of significant damage you would suffer or the next affliction that would be applied to you. If a single attack or effect causes both and/or multiple afflictions at once, the entire effect is negated. Minor instances of damage and less impactful afflictions will not trigger this unless sufficient instances of those afflictions are applied at once to have a cumulatively significant impact. Additional instances of this boon can be accumulated.
-

The high priestess was a tall woman, although Taika still towered over her. She placed a comforting hand on his forearm.

“Remember that the powers we gain are not just about essences and awakening stones, but about who we are. This is true for our aura powers most of all. Your aura is inspiring, and that isn’t just a power that you have. It’s a reflection of something inside you. I’ve always held that as we gain power, it doesn’t change us, but concentrates us. It takes who we are, shaves away the fluff at the edges and leaves behind the distillation of our core natures. You are a man that will inspire courage. Lift people up. That is a very fine thing. Not everyone’s reflection is so uplifting.”

She turned her gaze to the ominous eye looming over the camp. Jason’s aura did not push out beyond the boundaries of the pyramid to impose on the camp, but essence users with aura senses could easily detect it. Even more than Jason’s aura in person, the building was portentous, benevolent but also judgemental. It radiated a sense that to enter it was to abide by its rules, that transgressors would pay the price of their sins.

“I can see why Asano warned me,” Hana said. “I’m not sure I want to send anyone in there after all.”

“I’m not sure you want to go in there yourself,” Taika said. “Jason has... views about gods.”

“My god seems to like him. Which is strange, given what I know of Asano. Certainly given that aura.”

“How much do you know about Jason’s background?”

“Not much. I can tell he’s an outworlder. Like you.”

“We come from the same world. Jason had responsibilities there, ones that shouldn’t have been his to bear. What our world taught him was that he couldn’t allow anyone to stand in his way when things absolutely needed doing, even if that meant becoming a tyrant. Jason is always the first one to stand between people and the bad things coming after them, which I think that’s why your god likes him. But he got used to people standing in his way, even when he was killing himself to save them.”

“And who keeps him in check if he won’t listen to anyone?”

“No one,” Arabelle told her as she approached the pair. “And that’s the problem. He never trusted authority in the first place. The other world taught him, when the stakes were at their highest, that he had to become the authority. One that no one can command. So now, he defies everyone. Kings, diamond rankers. Gods, great astral beings.”

“That sounds like a path to a quick death.”

“It is,” Taika said. “He doesn’t let death command him, either.”

“Everything’s ready with Emir’s bunker,” Arabelle said. “We should start moving people into the bunkers.”

“We’re waiting on Asano to open his building back up,” Hana said. “He wanted to show me in himself. He thought that there would be an issue with our priests.”

“He’s right,” Arabelle said. “You’ll see for yourself what it means to defy even gods in there. It’s unsettling, being cut off from the comforting presence of your god when you’ve gotten so used to it. You might want to put the priests in the other bunker.”

“We need people in both, so I’ll lead the ones in Asano’s bunker myself. Once he opens it up.”

Shade emerged from Arabelle's shadow and Jason stepped out of the familiar's shadowy form.

“Sorry I’m late. Dashing heroics; you know how it is. Anyway, shall we?”

Chapter 674

Luck That Good

The sky rang with noise despite the battle at the centre of the Yaresh being a dozen kilometres away. Even from the outskirts, barely within the outer walls, the titanic figures could be seen looming over the towers at the heart of the city. The eagle-headed garuda was entangled with snakes wrapping around his body, as if a basket of them had been tipped over him. There was also a cluster of serpents of almost unbelievable enormity, as if sea monsters had risen from the deep and merged into a leviathan hydra.

The air thundered as the colossal adversaries destroyed buildings of metal and stone as if they were cardboard. Debris flew out over the city, chunks of masonry whistling like bombs as they fell from the sky. The garuda was diamond rank and its opponent was the same, having rapidly passed through silver and gold rank as it grew.

At the outskirts of the city, just inside the outer walls, was the refugee camp for those displaced from towns to the south. The camp was a flurry of activity as the people shuffled into the two cloud palaces that had been converted into bunkers. The larger bunker, belonging to Emir Bahadir, was a dome from which five leaning towers extended up and out. The other was a pyramid made up of matte black hexes with blue and orange light glowing between the panels. The pyramid did not rise to a point, instead having a cupped top. Floating over it was a giant eye made up of nebulous blue and orange light.

Hana Shavar looked up at the ominous eye as her people led civilians into the wide doors at the base of the pyramid. She was the High-Priestess of the Healer for the city-state of Yaresh, but she had sent most of her own people into the gold-rank bunker belonging to Bahadir.

There was a reason she directed all the clergy, both from her church and others, away from the bunker belonging to Jason Asano. When it had taken the form of a hospital, she had found the building to have an unnerving quality she couldn't quite place. Now it was in full defensive mode, the power lurking within no longer hidden. Somehow, Asano's building could place a barrier between priests and their gods, cutting of the voices of the deities.

The constant presence of her god's power had always been a comfort to Hana, watching over her in her greatest moments and darkest hours alike. Only in a few rare moments had she been cut off from him, in an otherworldly realm or the heart of another god's sacred ground. Those times were the worst for any priest.

For those who had felt the direct touch of their deity, every feeling and instinct told them it was a power without limit. An all-seeing, all-powerful force, beyond the petty concerns of the mortals that served them. When that presence was cut off, the fact that even the gods had limits was a harsh reality to face. Ground that should have been solid underfoot suddenly lurched, unstable.

Hana had experienced it enough times that, while uncomfortable, it was something she had grown used to. Grappling with the knowledge that her instincts and reality conflicted had challenged her faith, but ultimately came to reinforce it. She realised that her god not being all-powerful meant that he was not simply an omnipotent, benevolent force, bestowing grace on small mortals. He had limits, albeit extreme ones.

The revelation that strengthened her faith was that her god had limits, her faith was not just some game he was playing; that her position as a priestess was not pointless in the face of ultimate power. He might not need her as much as she needed him, but he did need her. She wasn't just taking from this great being, but also had something to give. Her purpose, her life's work, was true and good.

This was what gave her comfort in those moments when she was somewhere beyond her god's power. She could be his hands when he could not reach, his eyes when he could not see and his voice when he could not speak. She was a priestess. The representative of her god, and that was never more important than when she was cut off from him.

Not every priest had come to this conclusion, however, with the revelation having taken Hana years to not just reach but truly internalise. It was not something she could offer her fellow priests in the middle of a refugee evacuation, so she pushed all the priests into Bahadir's bunker, where just walking inside would not threaten a crisis of faith.

There was no shortage of secular staff to guide people into Asano's sinister lair, although Asano himself was no longer present. He had shown up long enough to reconfigure the building from a hospital into the menacing pyramid bunker it was now, but he had immediately returned to rescuing people caught up in the battle of colossi.

In his place was Jason's familiar, Shade, although most of the shadow-creature's multiple bodies were apparently busy. Shade directed a larger group of shadow entities, whose presence neither Shade nor Asano had explained beyond referring to them as avatars. They were dark silhouettes that looked like people in hooded cloaks, with a large single eye instead of a face. It was hard to miss that those eyes were reflections of both the giant orb floating over the bunker, along with Asano's own eyes.

Hana had checked the bunker before allowing anyone inside and now Shade led her back into the building. They moved past the lines of people heading in through the large doorway, directed by Asano's dark avatars.

The walls, floors and ceilings were cold, hard and empty. They were made from dark crystal flecked with blue, silver and gold. There was no decoration and none of the leafy green plants that had been found all throughout the hospital variant of the building. Having seen inside the dormitory sections, she knew that they were at least furnished with plush cloud furniture.

"The dormitory spaces set aside for the refugees may not offer a lot of room," Shade assured her, "but they are more comfortable than the hallways suggest."

Hana glanced at the shadow familiar, not for the first time wondering if he could read minds.

"I appreciate that," she told him, "but safety is the priority, not comfort."

"Do not worry on that front, Priestess Shavar. I would say gods help those who come here looking for trouble, but they will need more than gods in Mr Asano's domain."

There was an undercurrent of ominous glee to the familiar's polite tone that was sufficiently subtle that she may well have been imagining it. His words would have felt like false bravado if not for the gaping hole in her mind where the presence of her god was normally settled.

Various passages and rooms had a wall of mist blocking them off. These walls were as impermeable to Hana's senses as the rest of the pyramid, which was another reason it unnerved her. Magical senses that could take in the city at a glance were stopped by the walls as surely as her vision. It left her feeling as isolated from the world as she was from her god.

"The walls serve to secure the civilians in the dormitories," Shade explained, once more anticipating her concerns. "While the outer walls are strong, a sufficiently dedicated attack will penetrate them, especially if gold-rankers are involved. The dormitories are the most reinforced internal spaces, making the empty corridors a more appealing path for enemies traversing the inside. It will give the defences time to deal with them."

"Can the defences deal with gold rankers that can punch their way in?"

"I am quietly confident, Priestess Shavar."

"I suspect, Shade, that you are quietly everything."

"That is very kind of you to say, Priestess."

They arrived at an elevating platform at the centre of the pyramid that was also shrouded in mist. They stepped through the mist and the elevator ascended higher into the building.

“Beyond myself and the avatars, only you have access to this central shaft,” Shade explained as the platform passed through more mist barriers in each floor. There were only four, with the platform stopping in a room with no ceiling. Above their heads was the open cup with the nebulous eye floating over it, and high above that, the city’s barrier dome. From the open ceiling, the walls of the room sloped down, being the outer walls of the pyramid.

“This room seems like an invitation to break in,” Hana said, looking up at the ominous floating eye.

“It does, doesn’t it?” Shade said. “Let us hope the messengers are polite enough to accept.”

Images started appearing in the air around them. Most showed scenes from inside or around the buildings, mostly people shuffling into the bunkers in queues or settling into the dormitories. One showed a man arguing with one of the camp staff, and as soon as she focused on it, sound started playing. The man was complaining about the constricted space, apparently convinced that some people were being given private rooms.

“There’s always a few,” Hana muttered, the sound dimming as her attention moved on. Her gaze fell on a zoomed in perspective of the distant battle. The eagle-headed giant was ravaging the hydra heads and the serpents crawling over it, often devouring them outright. Even so, they seemed to replenish themselves endlessly, more snakes appearing as the hydra heads rapidly healed or grew back entirely. She again glanced up.

“Is that vision coming from the large eye?”

“It is. This room can show anything from inside the building or that the eye can see. You can monitor the bunkers and the surrounding conditions from here. If you fight in here you will have an environmental advantage, although I advise you to withdraw if and when attackers break in. The elevating platform will safely extract you.”

“Assuming that the messengers really do attack the city.”

“They are already assembling. Mr Asano has arranged for you to extend your senses beyond this room if you filter them through the eye.”

It took Hana a moment to figure out how, but passing her aura and magic senses through the eye before extending them over the city was fairly intuitive. She quickly sensed the battle of diamond-rank titans, overshadowing everything else. She sensed adventurers around the city, scrambling to rescue citizens or prepare for attack. Her senses passed

through the city's active barrier magic far easier than it should have and she sensed the messengers gathering around the city on every side.

Having taken part in attacks on the messenger strongholds, Hana understood their strategies. Each messenger was at least a little different from the others, but they fell into several broad roles. One of the most important, at least for large scale operations, were the summoners.

Summoners amongst the messengers had many advantages over their essence-user counterparts. Not only were their powers more convenient to activate, requiring no summoning circles, but they also summoned creatures in greater number. Their creatures might be less individually powerful, but that was an acceptable trade-off when it allowed them to balloon the relatively small number of messengers.

Hana could sense them building up their forces, not far from the city walls. It was close enough to be a real threat, but not so close as to be attacked without people leaving the protection of the city. Only a few skirmish specialists were out making trouble amongst the enemy, while the rest waited for the attack. The number of defenders was unfortunately low, with many adventurers still in the towns to the south.

"That's not good," Hana said as she used the giant eye to pan her senses over the messenger forces. "It doesn't look like they've manage to infiltrate the shield infrastructure nodes to sabotage them, but they clearly understand how the city barrier works."

"There is a flaw in the city defences?" Shade asked.

"Not a flaw, but there are only so many ways to shield an entire city, and no solution is perfect. Every system has weaknesses, and knowing how they works means those weaknesses can be exploited. In this city, the defensive screen is adaptive, meaning that it focuses the shield energy to any areas under attack in any given moment. It excels against monster attacks, which are sporadic by nature. It's why this type of barrier is so common in cities and fortress towns. But if you have the numbers to assault the entire shield all at once, instead of staging sporadic attacks like monsters do, you reveal the weakness."

"I believe I see," Shade said. "If you take a shield designed to focus its power on places is attacked, and then attack everywhere, the shield becomes thin all over. It then becomes vulnerable to big, instantaneous attacks," Shade deduced.

"Exactly. The shield won't collapse if you punch a hole in it, but it will take time to self-repair the breach. Long enough that you can get a good number of people through all at once. And we know for a fact that the messengers have at least one diamond-ranker. I'm guessing they're going to spread the attacks of all their summoned creatures to thin out the shield. Then they'll punch through various spots with simultaneous attacks from their

diamond ranker and stronger gold rankers. The openings will only be temporary, but enough for their strongest forces to come through, along with enough summons to serve as fodder.”

“I assume the people commanding the city defences are well aware of this,” Shade said.

“Of course; they’ll be watching this far closer than us. They would have already sent people out to disrupt the enemy, if we had the people to send. It’s looking more and more like the worm-infested towns to the south were never meant to be the real invasion force.”

“Or they were and this attack is a contingency for if they were discovered prior to being ready.”

Hana shook her head.

“Multiple-stage plans with integrated contingencies. I do not like smart enemies.”

“For a smart enemy, the strategy you have posited seems like an all or nothing proposition. If the strike forces who breach the city fail to conquer it, they will be cut off once the barrier repairs the holes.”

“They’re not here to conquer,” Jason said as he stepped out of Shade’s body like the shadow creature was a doorway. “They’re here to sow terror. We may not have the people to take the fight to them, but we can at least see where they are setting up their strongest attackers.”

Jason casually gestured with his arm as he tugged the hood back from his head to reveal his face. The images floating around the room all shifted, their original depictions getting replaced. The new ones showed various locations outside the city, as seen through the slight shimmer of the defensive barrier. It was a dome that rose up from the city wall, and now it was surrounded by enemies.

Messengers only made up a minority of the forces, and usually hovered somewhere near the top of the city wall. Their summons, all of which could fly, surrounded the domed barrier from all angles, including directly above. The summoned monsters were strange to Jason’s eye, divergent from the normal pattern. Most monsters looked like they could appear in the environment in which they spawned, so long as there was enough magic. Aquatic shark-crab hybrids on the coast. Swamp monsters with sodden bark-like skin. Even the more bizarre ones that were mostly mouths and tentacles appeared in magically corrupted lands, dark caves or the depths of the ocean, where such entities were unwelcome, but not unexpected.

The messenger summons were different. They didn’t look like anything that would be naturally produced in any environment not depicted by MC Escher. One was a set of

concentric metal bands, floating in their air. They span around one another, their edges covered in eyes that flicked gazes all around. Another looked like a single closed eyelid with wings sticking out either side, but when the lid opened, it revealed not an eye but a mouth with rows of dagger teeth. They were all similarly alien, although eyes and wings featured heavily. Some were geometric, looking like floating sigils. Jason spotted a giant disembodied hand with a mouth on the palm and eyes on the fingertips.

Hana realised that the images in the pyramid's viewing room were not picking out random strange monsters, but instead what was most likely the strike teams. She could sense their strength, with gold ranked messengers gathered into clusters around the city.

"See where they're positioned," Jason told her Hana. "Do you see what those locations have in common?"

Hana extended her senses again, focusing on those areas. In each one she sensed lines of civilians streaming in those directions, along with the powerful magic of the permanent bunkers designed for monster incursions on the city.

"They're going after the bunkers," she said in a horrified whisper.

"Yep," Jason said. "I think they want to break through the defence barrier, inflict as many civilian casualties as possible and get out before the barrier stabilises. I don't know if this was always the plan or if it's a backup once they saw our new bird man friend fighting their snake monster. Either way, I think it's what they're up to now."

"Do you know where the city's diamond rankers are?" Hana asked.

"Helping out the garuda, last I saw," Jason said. "Fortunately, the garuda is doing the heavy lifting. If our diamond rankers had to deal with that *and* the messengers, this city would be done."

"Then we are extremely lucky he is here," Hana said.

Jason frowned.

"Yeah," he said unhappily. "We'd have been completely bugged if he wasn't here. I don't trust luck that good."

Chapter 675

Nice and Grunty

The city of Yaresh was under siege by messengers and their summoned monsters. It was Jason's first time participating in the full-blown defence of a city, and a high-magic one at that. During the defence of Rimaros he had been working monster cleanup on another island.

If not for the danger to the people of the Yaresh, he would have enjoyed being an unremarkable cog in the machine, one of many silver-rankers recruited to the task. As the messengers and their summons were silver-rank at a minimum, bronze-rank adventurers would only be a liability in battle, despite their numbers. They were relegated to support roles, which worked well for healers but reduced combat adventurers to glorified ushers, leading civilians into bunkers.

Silver rank was considered the threshold for becoming a real adventurer in high-magic zones. The leap in power from bronze to silver was far greater than anything that came before, as bronze rankers were just too easy to kill. Silver rank represented the stage at which a well-trained essence user took their first major step away from frail mortality, their bodies transforming from a sack full of weak points into a sack full of hit points.

Silver was also a stage that any adventurer could reach if sufficiently resourced. Outside of magically desolate zones like Greenstone, an active adventurer could go from bronze to silver in five-to-ten years. For guild elites, three years was the norm, and many went faster. There were always circumstances that provided opportunities for the bold, with the extended monster surge Pallimustus had been through being an extreme example. There were now more newly-minted silver rankers than any other period on record.

Even the gold-rankers had seen their numbers grow, although to a far lesser degree. The gold rankers of Yaresh were the true power in the city's defence, with Jason's gold-rank companions already having joined them. Emir, Arabelle and Callum Morse were three-quarters of their old adventuring team, with the slot of Arabelle's absent husband filled by Emir's wife, Constance. They had moved out with Amos Pensinata, who was famously powerful even by gold-rank standards.

Carlos was a healer, and not a combat one like Arabelle. He had been deployed to assist dealing with the many injured by the battle taking place at the centre of the city. The

building-sized garuda still fought the serpent apocalypse beast, even as the messengers gathered outside.

The native gold rankers of Yaresh were in charge of the city's defence. The Deputy-Director of the Adventure Society had a communication power not unlike Jason's, but more powerful by virtue of rank. He had used it to connect every team leader in the city of silver-rank and above, coordinating the city's defenders.

Jason had taken a brief pause from rescue efforts to check that his cloud palace had formed a defensive bunker properly, having never properly tested the defences. He was in the observation room at the peak of the pyramid-shaped building with Hana Shavar and Shade, eyes closed as he explored the building with his magical senses. The structure all looked good, the weapon systems ready and waiting. They were the contribution of Travis Noble, the magical ordnance specialist from Earth. Jason had though the results would be more gun-like, but instead were clearly shaped by Jason's own proclivities.

He could also sense the people in the bunkers. The civilians were filling up the dormitories, and he could sense Estella Warnock and Taika in the small quarters he had set aside for them. Estella was pacing nervously while Taika was meditating. Jason guessed that Taika was hoping to break through to silver in time to join the fight, and close as he was, he might even do it. Jason didn't think leaping straight into a fight from a rank-up was a good idea, but Jason was in no position to criticise reckless leaps into combat.

Humphrey reached out through Jason's party chat ability. As team leader, Humphrey was the one taking directives from city defence command and relaying them to the group.

"Jason, the evacuation of the civilians into the city defence bunkers is in full swing. They're directing everyone to prep for incursion, assigning teams to the bunkers they expect to be attacked."

"Have we been assigned to the refugee camp?" Jason asked.

"No, the refugee camp is surrounded by adventurer vehicles, plus the two cloud palaces. The entertainment district has bunkers that are some of the largest but weakest in the city, so we're being sent there along with many other teams. We're already on our way, so can you meet us on the way?"

"No worries, mate."

Jason stepped out from one of the bodies Shade had stationed on a rooftop. Most of Shade's bodies remained with Jason for combat purposes, but a handful were stationed in the cloud palace or in strategic locations around the city. This allowed Jason to quickly

shadow jump to any of them, navigating around the city without putting his portal on cooldown.

It was not hard to orient himself after appearing on the rooftop, with the diamond rank battle between the garuda and the endlessly spawning serpent creature impossible to miss. The eagle-headed humanoid was taller than the towering buildings of the city centre, and every time it struck at the hydra-like serpent heads it was fighting, thunder rumbled across the city. Even some ten kilometres away, air that should have been still under the city's barrier dome was stirred by the shockwaves of the fight.

After sparing the battle a quick glance, Jason ran to the edge of the building and leapt off. His cloak of darkness and stars took the form of sweeping wings, undulating as they pushed him through the air.

He looked over the city from his high vantage. Much of Yaresh was built around living trees, magically shaped and then filled out with stone. The heart of the city contrasted this as living buildings gave way to polished metal and shining glass towers. Many of these had been damaged or toppled entirely by the garuda and its serpentine foe fighting amongst them.

The city was washed in a blue tint as sunlight passed through the dome of the city's defence barrier. Normally visible as little more than a heat-haze shimmer, it was glowing blue as it fended off attacks all across its surface. The messengers had begun their assault and their summons were gathered around it like a swarm of angry bees.

Jason was far from the only airborne traveller as the air was filled with adventurers travelling alone or in teams. Most rode personal vehicles of various types, from flying skimmer cars like a *Star Wars* character to floating clouds like Sun Wukong. Others rode on familiars, had magical wings like Jason, or simply flew around like superheroes. Sophie was one of those, catching up to Jason as she easily outpaced him in the air. The rest of the team trailed behind in Onslow's expanded shell.

Clive's familiar, Onslow, could expand his shell into an open-sided flying craft, the unshelled tortoise taking the form of a small green humanoid. Wearing child's clothes provided by Clive, he looked like an adorable team mascot. He was still more than capable of directing deadly elemental attacks from the glowing runes atop his shell, however.

Jason and Sophie slowed to join the others in the shell. Clive had purchased some furniture for travelling inside Onslow's shell, but as they were headed for combat he had left most of it in his storage space. He had only put out a plush rug that they team was sitting on as Humphrey briefed them. Sophie and Jason flew in and sat with the others and Stash, in the form of a puppy, crawled into Sophie's lap for head scratches.

“The messengers have several aspects broadly in common with essence users,” Humphrey explained. He wouldn’t be introducing anything too revelatory, but was a big believer in reiterating information until it stuck. As the team’s primary strategist, he had studied their future enemies more than anyone else on the team.

“The messengers all have unique power sets,” he continued. “Not as many or as varied as essence users, but don’t underestimate their versatility. Also like us, their power sets tend to fall into roles, so look out for what they’re doing and react accordingly. Strikers are high damage but not as resilient, so prioritise them.”

He nodded at Sophie.

“Defenders are a lesser danger, but hard to kill. They’re also good at occupying multiple attackers so they won’t go after the others. Sophie and I will be largely responsible for occupying them so the rest of you can go for softer targets, but be ready to focus defenders down if that’s the right play. Belinda will take on the field tactician role as normal, so she’ll be looking for opportunities we can jump on.”

“Healers are the top priority, right?” Rufus asked.

“As always,” Humphrey said with a nod. “Healers are rare amongst the messengers, but if we spot one, it goes to the top of the list. Be aware that they will be the most heavily defended, so we only go after healers as a team, and with a plan. Or we send Jason by himself.”

“You’re just going to throw me in there?”

“Yes,” Humphrey said. “And you’re not a pinpoint assassin, so I expect you to kill more than just the healers while you’re at it. Next up we have summoners, who are the weakest of the messenger archetypes individually, but critical to their forces. Killing them won’t get rid of the summons, but it will reduce the cohesiveness of their summoned monsters. Low priority, but take the chance if it’s there.”

He looked at Neil and Clive.

“The key thing to watch out for is that many messengers have the power to isolate individuals, forcing a one-on-one confrontation. Neil and Clive, you’re our weakest solo fighters, so stick together with Belinda in Onslow’s shell. Clive, I want you focused on setting up big hits against any messengers you can get a line on through the wall of summoned monsters. Lindy and Neil, boost him when you aren’t focused on healing or protecting the group. Lindy, I want you to hold your tricks for when we can make the most of throwing the messengers a surprise or two. Stash, I want you to stick to them and keep them safe.”

Stash let out an affirmative yip.

“If they can’t get you alone,” Humphrey continued, “they can’t use those isolating powers on you. Just watch out for area attacks, since you’ll be clustered up. You know what to do, Neil.”

Neil nodded.

“I can’t afford to just stand still,” Sophie said. “I’m useless that way and might as well have stayed back at the cloud house.”

“You’re right,” Humphrey agreed. “Everyone not sticking to Onslow will be on the move, operating with some degree of independence. You and I will be staying relatively close, effectively outriding for the others. I’ll be sweeping summons that get near Onslow, and I want you getting in the face of any messengers, Soph.”

“I take the big ones and you take the little ones,” Sophie told him.

“Essentially, yes,” he confirmed. “The messengers have the intelligence to make strategic and tactical choices their summons won’t. I want you getting in their faces, disrupting whatever they’re trying to do and setting them up for big hits from Clive.”

“You don’t want me to kill them?”

“Focus on disruption, at least at the start. You’ll have plenty of fight to power up and you’ll be nice and grunty in the late stages.”

“Oh, I’ll be the grunty one, will I?” she asked and Humphrey’s face reddened.

“Time and place,” he told her through gritted teeth.

“What about the one-to-one powers the messengers have to isolate?” Rufus asked.

“As long as the group stays together, all the information we have says they’ll be fine. For those of us moving alone, we have to assume that some or all of us will be hit by them eventually. Most likely after the messengers realise they can’t break off Neil or Clive to target.”

“Will they even go for us?” Sophie asked. “They have to assume that we know about their powers, so anyone going it alone can handle themselves in a duel.”

“Don’t underestimate messenger arrogance,” Jason said. “Our side might rate the messengers as slightly below a combat-focused adventurer in a one-to-one comparison, but I’ll bet you they do the opposite. And I honestly don’t know which side is right. I promise you that their auras will be a critical factor.”

“We can’t just hunker up in fear of solo fights,” Humphrey said. “As Sophie said, if we don’t fight our way, we might as well not have come. These enemies are too strong to bring anything but our best. We just have to trust that we can take them alone and get back to the fight.”

“Which means some of us will be relatively alone,” Rufus said.

“Yes,” Humphrey agreed. “Especially you and Jason, Rufus. You don’t have your own flight power, so I want you on the ground. Messenger summons are all flyers, but they’ll be trying to break into the underground bunkers.”

“I can clear out summons while simultaneously setting up my powerful attacks for the messengers,” Rufus said. “Maybe catch some of those defenders by surprise with big hits.”

“Jason,” Humphrey said. “I know you don’t like talking about Earth, but from what Farrah tells me, you should be just fine in the middle of the enemy. Is that something you can handle?”

“No worries. Being alone in the middle of thousands of monsters is kind of my thing.”

“Just don’t die again,” Neil told him.

“No promises.”

“Jason, you’re out of resurrections,” Humphrey pointed out.

“I hate to break to you, cobber, but so is everyone else. Even your Immortality power won’t get you back up until gold rank.”

“He’s not wrong,” Neil said. “Resurrection magic has been harder for a few years now. Even at gold rank you have minutes at best, and only the most complex and difficult healing magic can do it.”

“Sorry about that,” Jason told him.

“It was something that the gods of healing and death did to how magic works,” Neil said. “It wasn’t your fault.”

Jason’s expression became an apologetic wince.

“It wasn’t *not* my fault. I thought I told you this. The whole bit with Reaper making a deal so the World Phoenix wouldn’t keep bringing me back from the dead.”

“I thought that was a joke.”

“Why would that be a joke?”

“Because it’s insane.”

Neil let out a sigh.

“Look at who I’m talking to. Shade, please tell me the Reaper didn’t have the gods change how magic works because of Jason.”

“The Reaper did not have the gods change how magic works because of Mr Asano.”

“Thank you,” Neil said, his voice relieved.

“Mr Asano was more of an inciting incident that pushed the Reaper to act on something he has been concerned about for quite some time.”

Neil gave Shade a flat look.

“Is it too late for me to go find energy vampire Thadwick and join his team again?”