

## 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?”