

Chapter 676

Breach

Jason and his team were riding inside Onslow's expanded shell toward the entertainment district. Buried under the taverns, clubs, theatres and nightclubs was a massive subterranean bunker, one of the least secure in the city. It was large and magically reinforced, but mostly relied on a sturdy roof, with no active defences that could deter attackers from digging in eventually.

That was usually fine if a monster spawned in the city or some managed to break in during a monster surge, but messengers were more intelligent foes. Not only would they bother to go after the people in the bunker but realise its relative vulnerability. Jason's team and others like it were tasked with holding off the messengers once they made it into the city. Eventually they would be forced to either retreat through the breaches they created in the barrier dome or be trapped inside when they closed.

Jason stood at the edge of Onslow's shell looking out at the dome that spanned over the city. The barrier had already turned from clear to blue as summoned monsters attacked the entire surface of the dome. As it became increasingly stressed it started buzzing like wet power lines, even giving off a similar ozone smell. Most people wouldn't detect it, but Jason's silver-rank olfactory senses could smell the tang of it, even from far below.

Humphrey tilted his head, listening to a voice in his head. He was currently under two communication powers: Jason's linking him to the team, and a gold-ranker coordinating the city defences.

"They're expecting breaches at any moment," he warned. "We'll be on site in only a minute or two, but we may be arriving at a fight already in progress."

Gary was picking his way along a street far closer to the centre of the city than Jason and his team. This was a part of Yaresh where buildings were made of polished metal and stone rather than living wood. The buildings were also taller, at least the ones that had more than a shattered base pointing jaggedly upward like the hilt of a broken sword.

The street was in ruins, entire sections of building having fallen to the street. Navigating them alternately meant clambering over, skirting around or even going through them, entering through a shattered section of wall and exiting through a door or window that somehow remained intact.

Gary was travelling with other essence users specialised in various crafts, moving closer to the great battle at the centre of the city than most adventurers. The craftspeople had little to no combat experience other than Gary, but that barely mattered. Anyone short of diamond rank who got involved in the fight between the garuda and the serpent monster would die helplessly, combat veteran or not.

Cresting a toppled tower, Gary paused to look up. Debris was raining from the sky as titanic beings smashed apart buildings. Some of the debris was the buildings, landing on other buildings or the wide boulevards like bombs. Dust choked the air, acrid in the lungs of any low-rankers caught in it.

The air was filled with shrill cries from the serpents and the thunderous crashes as the fight destroyed yet more of the city. Behind those irregular sounds was a sonorous hum, growing louder as the barrier endured attacks from the outside. The light filtering through the dome had become a deeper blue, lending the city around Gary the feel of an underwater ruin. He briefly thought back to the village under the lake he, Farrah and Rufus had discovered near Greenstone, shortly before they met Jason for the first time.

He shook his head, his mane dancing around his head. He looked down at where the others were making their way over the obstruction. They may not have been fighters but they still had silver-rank strength, endurance and agility, so they needed no help. The support team of bronze-rankers with them were actual adventurers and were likewise capable.

The only member of the group that had any trouble negotiating the terrain was Gary's summon. A ten foot tall forge golem, it was a humanoid construct of grime-black industrial metal. The glow of molten metal radiated from the joints, between the metal panels and in the eye holes that were the only features on an otherwise blank face. It was not a great climber, but Gary's almost gold-rank strength was able to haul the six ton golem with no more concern than if whatever it was on would hold it. In many cases, the golem went through, rather than over obstacles.

Gary and the other craftspeople were all volunteers looking to help with the evacuation. Their powers were more effective than the average adventurers for dealing with widespread destruction. They could meld stone, reinforce buildings in danger of collapsing and use other techniques to extract any survivors who had become trapped. The support team of bronze-rank adventurers with them were assigned by the Adventure Society, having powers well-suited to getting the rescued civilians to safety once free from whatever had them trapped. Most had vehicle or speed powers, but the Adventure Society had even managed to spare a portal user and a healer.

The healer was especially useful with the thick dust that tightening the lungs of the normal-rankers they found. Children were especially vulnerable, often unconscious until subjected to a healing or cleanse ability. Luckily, low-rankers were not taxing on a bronze-rank healer's mana reserves.

The group had little time to spare. Once the messengers and their summoned monster army broke through, there would be no safe evacuation of civilians through the streets. Waiting out the rest of the attack buried where they were was a far from great option, especially for those with injuries, but the open streets would not be safe.

It was already proving dangerous even before the dome was broken through. Twice Gary's group had encountered naga, which were people with the upper body of an elf and the lower body of a serpent. These were lesser beings created by the serpent-spawning apocalypse beast the eagle-headed garuda was fighting. Fortunately, the freshly created beings had been disoriented by their coming into being. He guessed that was why they'd wandered off. One had been bronze and another silver, which Gary had easily dispatched, but he dreaded meeting a gold.

At this point, the streets were mostly clear of civilians not in need of rescue, as they had already evacuated to the bunkers. The bunkers were designed to withstand monster attacks and the civilians had been drilled in swiftly heading to them when anything threatened to get past the walls. This usually meant monsters manifesting inside the city, but soon after the monster surge, those drills were fresh in everyone's mind. With magical assistance to organise everything, evacuating the populace into the bunkers had gone smoothly in most of the city.

The place this wasn't true was the centre of the city. Groups like Gary's were risking extreme danger to rescue people trapped in fallen buildings or cut off by blocked streets. What should have been easy terrain had turned harsh and was getting worse by the moment as debris rained from the sky. Anything from loose rubble to the better part of entire buildings were leaving massive craters or blocking off entire streets.

More than once, Gary had to interpose himself to shield another craftsperson, getting hammered into the ground for his trouble. After each instance he had needed a healing potion and to conjure a fresh shield. As they moved, they saw many people who had been struck down while attempting to escape.

Gary and his group reached the next building where they sensed the auras of trapped survivors and went to work. Gary had the hammer, iron, fire and forge essences. His powers were better suited to smithing weapons than reinforcing buildings, but fortunately had experience to draw on. In the years leading up to the monster surge, Gary had spent

time moving between isolated towns, helping them prepare. Not only had he supplied them with weapons but worked on reinforcing walls and other defensive infrastructure.

The craftspeople shaped stone, reinforced structures and opened up pathways to dig out trapped people. These were people either too low-rank to escape themselves or people trapped with low-rankers. A silver-ranker pushing their own way out could easily cause a shift in debris that killed the people with them. Sadly, Gary had already encountered some who had made that mistake.

Each situation required its own adaptation to the specific conditions, testing the creativity of the craftspeople. As they went from rescue to rescue, they discovered which approaches worked best in most circumstances, refining their use each time. A common tactic was for a tunnel into a fallen building to be stone-shaped into place. The two-piece chest plate of Gary's forge golem then opened up to spray a layer of molten metal across the surface in a surprisingly well-controlled stream. A water-user then cooled the molten metal to reinforce the tunnel.

The silver-rank conjured metal was thin but strong, and while it would vanish along with the golem in time, it was more than enough to evacuate whoever was at the end of the new tunnel. Rough and ready construction was the order of the day at every site as jury-rigged girders and iron walls only had to hold long enough to get trapped civilians out.

The group realised their time was up from the hum of the barrier dome. A constant drone behind the crashes of debris and thunderous sounds of diamond-rank combatants, it had been consistently rising in pitch. Once the hum started to pulse, they knew the breach was about to happen. Gary looked up but couldn't see more than a hazy blue through the dust.

"Time to get to the bunkers ourselves," he declared, his tone brooking no dissent.

As a group they headed for the nearest bunker. It wasn't too far as the city centre had a number of them. In normal conditions, a silver-ranker on foot would reach one in minutes, if not seconds, but conditions were far from normal. The terrain was one thing, but in short order, they heard sounds in the air that were something between electrical discharges and breaking glass. They couldn't see it, but they knew the barrier had been breached.

Jason and his team had managed to reach the sky over the entertainment district just in time to see the breach occur. The breaches were centred over the bunkers, so the team had a clear view as the barrier dome rippled like water. The rippling magic energy shifted from blue to clear as monsters pushed against it, but then suddenly pulled back.

The summoned creatures moved aside from the other side of the dome and a messenger gathered energy over his head, arms raised. It formed an orange, red and yellow ball, glowing like a sun, the colours plain through the now-clear section of barrier. Other messengers fed streams of power into it as it slowly grew larger.

Jason and his team watched and waited, and were far from alone in doing so. The air was not as thick with adventurers as the other side of the barrier was with monsters, but it was far from empty. Many teams hovered in the air, in vehicles and on personal flight devices. More adventurers were on the rooftops far below, waiting to protect the bunker beneath the ground.

There was a moment of stillness on both sides of the barrier dome. It was not quiet, with the distant thunder of diamond-rank battle, but the air was thick with tension. The fireball grew larger than the messenger creating it, until it was finally unleashed.

The flaming sphere did not rush forward, moving slowly towards the barrier dome. It struck the clear, rippling section of the barrier, which went hard like glass. It then shattered, the sound not quite like glass and with a sharp electric crash. A jagged hole appeared in the barrier, but it did absorb all the power from the fireball before breaking. Fragments of brittle magic, temporarily made solid, fell a short distance before dissolving into nothing.

Monsters poured through the breach like pressurised water through a sudden leak. The summoned creatures were all bizarre flying entities, moving through the air and firing projectiles or swooping to the attack. A one-eyed griffin with four wings that looked freakishly like human arms dove in to the attack with lion-like forelimbs and eagle talon hind legs. A large uncut crystal, purple and floating in the air, was orbited by magic sigils carved from what looked like rubies and sapphires. The sigils conjured rings of flame and razor-sharp circles of ice that were shot at the adventurers the monsters were bearing down on.

Like all the others, Jason's team moved forward to meet them. Humphrey and Sophie launched out of Onslow's shell, while Rufus stepped off and dropped down. Jason stepped into Shade and vanished. As soon as they were gone, a shimmering wall of air swirled around the shell. Onslow could use various elemental powers by activating the glowing runes on the segments of his shell, and as of silver-rank, Clive could enhance them. He was using ritual magic to enhance the wind shield as Belinda, dressed in a robe and pointy hat, was shooting blasts of magic from her staff and wand. Neil was taking stock of the battleground forming in the sky, saving his mana for when his team needed it.

Along with Onslow, Belinda and Humphrey's familiars were at the ready. Stash was currently retaining his puppy form as it allowed him to stay out of the way. His task was to guard the shell and its occupants and he would shapeshift as and when needed. Belinda's astral lantern, Glimmer, was pumping out mana to the team. Given that the battle would be a long one, that would pay off more and more the longer the conflict continued. Her other familiar, Gemini, was a blurry replica of Clive. It was better at replicating abilities than before, now that it was silver rank, and shared Belinda's knack for doing more of the best thing anyone else was up to.

The team was variously ready and waiting or already on the move. The Battle of Yareh had begun.