

Chapter 464

Strategic Doctrine

“Clive,” Humphrey said. “Is that a kind of skyship you’re familiar with?”

“No,” Clive said.

The group watched the two approaching skyships using the vision-magnifying spell one of the other adventurers around them had shared.

The two approaching skyships were unlike any the group had seen. If Jason had been present he would have noticed a resemblance to old ironclad ships from the US civil war. They had a decidedly industrial look, with plenty of thick, crude metal plating and smoke pouring from a pair of stacks on the top. On the deck of the approaching skyships there were construct creatures, humanoid in shape but resembling their vessel in that they were made from crude industrial metal.

“The craftsmanship isn’t there to be true golems,” Clive assessed. “Are those constructs what the Builder cult was using when they attacked the expedition from Greenstone?”

“Similar,” Neil said, “although those were monster shaped, rather than people shaped. What’s the difference between a construct and a golem?”

“Golems are a specific type of construct,” Gary explained. “Usually shaped like oversized people, they’re more powerful than most other constructs. They’re less common because they’re expensive and hard to make.”

Gary was more familiar with Builder construct creatures than most, having studied them extensively in the wake of the expedition that claimed Farrah’s life.

“Clive,” Humphrey said. “If our skyship gets attacked, can it stay in the air?”

“I’m not sure it can stay in the air even if it doesn’t,” Clive said.

“Can we outrun them?” Jory asked. “For what look like flying lumps of iron, those airships seem fairly fast.”

“The crew is already pushing it harder than they should to maintain this speed,” Belinda said. “If we don’t crash first, they are going to catch us.”

“Alright,” Humphrey said. “That narrows our options.”

He turned to the other group of adventurers on the deck with them.

“We’ll take the first airship. Are you good to take the second?”

One of the adventurers stepped forward.

“I don’t see as we have a choice,” she said. “We’ll get it done.”

Humphrey nodded and then turned to his own group.

“Gary, Jory, are you in?” he asked.

“I may have given up adventuring,” Gary said, “but I’m not going to just stand around when trouble comes looking.”

“I need to stop spending time with you people,” Jory complained. “I only ever get in fights when you’re around.”

“Good man,” Gary said slapping on the back almost hard enough to send him over the side.

“Clive and I can port four people each,” Humphrey said. “I’ll go first with Sophie, Gary and Lindy to claim some ground and Clive will follow up with the rest. Everyone ready up.”

Everyone started grabbing gear from dimensional bags and storage spaces or conjuring it outright. Sophie pulled on a pair of tight, thin gloves while Jory put away his coat and pulled out another one, covered in pockets. Clive took out a wand and a staff and started drawing ritual circles in the air with his finger to attach to the ends of them. Gary wore armour that looked like an overheating furnace and took a shield and hammer from his dimensional bag. Belinda was engulfed in silver mist, which quickly faded to reveal a female leonid with forged armour, shield and hammer, courtesy of Gary. Gary’s eyes went wide.

“Oh, hey, Lindy,” he said. “Uh... how’s it going?”

“I’m not really a leonid, Gary.”

“We’re essence users,” Gary said. “It’s not who you are on the inside that matters. It’s what you look like that counts.”

“You’re going to let that go?” Neil asked Jory.

“Yep,” Jory said.

“You don’t feel any need to defend your lady?”

“She can take care of herself,” Jory said. “If she wants my help, she’ll ask. She’s not shy.”

Leonid Belinda leaned down to give Jory a peck on the cheek.

“That tickles,” he said as her fur brushed his face.

“If we’re quite done?” Humphrey asked. He had conjured up his dragon armour, the scales shimmering with rainbow colours, and sword stylised as a dragon’s wing.

Sophie, Humphrey, Gary and Belinda vanished as Humphrey teleported them to the closest skyship.

From inside the massive yacht, Jason and Farrah lounged in luxury as they watched the storm rage outside. The wild seas and sweeping winds did not trouble the cloud ship,

the interior resting as gently as a baby in a cradle even as the interior smashed through waves like a battering ram.

“I need to run you through some important aspects of local culture before we arrive,” Farrah said. “With the monster surge there will be a lot of adventurers that aren’t local, so people will be a little more accommodating in regards to etiquette, but that will only go so far.”

“That’s a good idea,” Jason said. “Easier to lay low if I know the rules. I didn’t think you’d been to Rimaros, though.”

“I haven’t, but it’s one of the big adventuring cities, like Vitesse. If we’d had time to train you properly, you’d have learned all this but you had more than enough to catch up on as it was.”

“Okay. Sexy teacher Farrah time it is.”

“Are you looking to get spanked?”

“Is that a trick question? I have been a naughty boy.”

“That’s enough out of you,” Farrah said.

“Yes, Mistress.”

Farrah shook her head.

“At least that brings us to the first and most important thing you need to know, which is that everything about you is bad and you shouldn’t do it.”

“That’s a little harsh.”

“Jason, Rimaros isn’t some little provincial town where people will leave you be because you have a few high-rank friends. There is an expectation of respect to those both higher and lower rank than you. What this means is that if a gold-ranker messes with you, the Adventure Society will come down on them like a hammer, so long as you weren’t acting like you. If you talk to gold-rankers like you talk to everyone with more power than you, they’ll slap you through a wall and no one will say a thing because you were asking for it.”

“Sounds fair.”

“I wish Gary was here. We could bet on how many hours it takes for a gold-ranker to punt you into the ocean.”

“I can be respectful.”

“A conclusion based on what evidence?”

“That’s a little hurtful.”

“Look, just don’t get up in anyone’s face,” Farrah said. “There’s a lot of reasons not to go roaming around during a monster surge, especially this one. First and foremost is that

whatever else we have going on, we're adventurers. This is the time where we step up and earn all the privileges we enjoy."

Jason nodded his agreement. He wasn't going to skip out on the monster surge, which was exactly the level of responsibility he wanted. After having the fate of the world on his shoulders, the idea of being an inconsequential, rank-appropriate part of a larger effort was exactly the palate cleanser he was looking for.

"There are other reasons for participating in the monster surge, of course. The chance to kill some of those Builder pricks is at the top of my personal list. Plus, if the Adventure Society finds out you did anything other than report to your nearest branch and do what you're told, you'll find things get tricky after the monster surge. Getting decent contracts suddenly gets hard and accessing society resources gets harder."

"So, we'll report in, do our part and then move on," Jason said. "Two, unremarkable silver-rankers who came back from the dead. Maybe it won't be a big deal because Knowledge told people I was alive."

He thought about it for a moment.

"No, she didn't see me die," he said. "Knowing her, she'd probably say something about being the goddess of Knowledge and not the goddess of Solid Deductions Made on the Basis of Reasonable Evidence."

"Knowing her?"

"We're acquainted," Jason said. "I wouldn't say friends, though. There's some tension there."

Farrah put her face in her hands.

"We haven't even met a single person and you're talking about socialising with a deity," she complained.

"It's fine," he assured her. "I mean, have I met a bunch of gods? Yes, but it's not like we hang out."

Farrah gave him a flat look.

"I told you, it's fine. What's the next thing I need to know about our destination? What's the signature drink? Does it have coconuts? I love coconuts."

"I don't know the signature drink."

"What kind of half-baked training did you go through? I should make some notes for Rufus and his family's academy. They could do Responsible Service of Alcohol certifications. What's better than an adventurer? An adventurer with an RSA."

Gary's huge hammer had its name, Gary's Medium Hammer, engraved on the metal shaft of the handle. Held in one hand, he smashed it down onto another of the crude metal constructs. Most of them were only bronze-rank, which was good because they were tougher than equivalent-rank monsters and there were a lot of them. The silver-rank ones scattered amongst them were extremely tough, along with being overpoweringly strong. If not for their relatively slow and clumsy movement, the numbers swarming the open deck of the skyship would have overwhelmed the team.

Fortunately, Gary's hammer was the right tool for the job. Ever since Farrah's death, he had made his personal weapons specialised to fight constructs and the freakish cultists that incorporated construct parts into their bodies. Even so, the silver-rank constructs boasted an almost implausible resilience. Belinda was wielding a replica of Gary's hammer he had made for her but the rest of the team would exhaust themselves before dealing with all the constructs.

The team had a lot of abilities that allowed them to endure, from cooldown reduction to mana recovery, in auras and active abilities. Even so, more and more of the constructs kept emerging from the lower decks, as if there was a barracks down there where the constructs were slowly waking up.

For this reason, the group switched to a strategy based on using the strengths of the constructs against them. The power and resilience of the constructs also made them heavy. Combined with their chosen mode of transport, a skyship, the solution was made obvious by Jory. He had drunk a large potion that transformed him into a hulking brute even stronger than the constructs and started flinging them over the side. Even if they survived the two-kilometre drop, they were no longer an immediate threat.

"We aren't over a town or something, are we?" Humphrey yelled out to Clive. Clive was off the side of the skyship, floating on top of his familiar, Onslow. Clive looked down and saw only uninhabited, rocky badlands. Clive gave Humphrey the thumbs up.

"We're switching to a fall guy strategy!" Humphrey bellowed and the team moved into action. Humphrey had been the driving force in building a comprehensive tactical and strategic doctrine. Jason had been the driving force behind the names.

Jory wasn't familiar with the team's strategies but was already ahead of the curve in throwing enemies overboard. Gary's powerful roar could blast the weaker bronze-rank ones off the ship in small clusters and Belinda, currently in leonid form, could do the same. Gary and Belinda were holding the line while the rest of the team went to work.

Sophie seemed to be everywhere at once. One moment she was stalling a construct long enough for a team member to deal with it. The next she was positioning herself so

that Neil could drop an explosive shield on her and blast one or even two constructs over the side. Then she leapt overboard herself, where Clive used his switch-teleport spell. Sophie was suddenly amongst the constructs again, having swapped places with a construct now plummeting towards the ground.

Most of the team's familiars were also in play. Belinda's lantern was mostly serving to replenish mana as its attacks did little to the constructs. Her other familiar was replicating Humphrey, swinging a huge sword at the enemy.

Onslow was hitting constructs with various elemental powers. At silver-rank, his abilities were more sophisticated, with control aspects to go with the existing raw power. Electricity attacks were especially effective on the metal constructs, although focus wind and water attacks also knocked them around and sometimes off the boat entirely.

Stash was more elusive, mostly going unseen. Then a giant bird would scoop up a construct and drop it off the ship or a tentacle would snake over the side and drag one overboard.

Occasionally a different and more dangerous enemy would arise from below decks. One was an ogre-like construct, obviously more powerful than the others along with being much better made. This was a true golem, not as clumsy or slow as the others.

Belinda used her Pit of the Reaper ability to conjure an inverted, extradimensional pit of shadows over the ship. Shadow arms reached down from its maw, plucking up constructs and dragging them in. Many arms picked up the golem but couldn't haul it into the pit. It fought itself free of the arms with prodigious strength but it was too late. The skyship was still on the move and in the time the golem freed itself, the pit had been left behind. The golem fell through the air in the skyship's wake.

The golem was not the last dangerous construct to emerge from the bowels of the ship. The next was much smaller, but also much prettier. A complete divergence from the heavy constructs and even the golem, this was a finely crafted and delicate sculpture. With many long, thin, interwoven parts, it looked somewhere between a winged insect and a chandelier. Sunlight glinted from its polished silver body, with many legs and four mantis-like blade arms. It was as much artwork as death machine.

It could fly but mostly moved in fluttering hops, quickly darting about. It made its way around Belinda and Gary with flickering ease, darting right at Neil, who didn't bother to dodge. The blade arms moved in a blur, almost too quickly to see. Sophie, however, was moving fast enough to be all but invisible.

"Mine!" she called loudly as she blocked the flashing attacks of the construct with her hands. The construct had four blade arms but Sophie had hands, feet, knees, elbows and

a forehead, all of which peppered the construct with attacks. Its body was sharp, yet even headbutting the creature left Sophie uncut as her powers negated retaliatory damage.

Despite looking delicate, the construct was remarkably tough. Sophie didn't hit all that hard but every attack came with resonating-force damage, bane to even the hardest armour.

Sophie had long ago accepted that her attacks would never deliver powerful, singular damage outside of careful setup and unusual circumstances. What her attacks did do was reliable damage, no matter how tough or strange the opponent. Her solution, then, was just to attacks a lot. The construct was fast but it was like lightning trying to outpace light. Slowly but surely, the construct was reduced to a ball of wiry scrap.

The team were eliminating constructs faster than they were emerging from below and they finally took the fight below decks. What they found was an automated construct factory, which they decommissioned with some judicious violence directed by Clive and Belinda. Eventually, they found the only living enemy of the ship, which was a pilot. When they burst into the bridge he exploded as a huge crystal star erupted from his insides, ripping his body to shreds.

"Haven't seen that in a while," Sophie said as she wiped pilot off her face. "So, do we steer this thing into the ground?"

"Seems like a waste," Belinda said. "Especially when our own skyship is getting a bit wonky."