

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 off 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."