

## Chapter 524

### Between Mortal and Something Else

Battle raged over the waters of the Storm Kingdom's northwestern reaches. The Builder's underwater city had surfaced for battle, disgorging airships to meet those from Rimaros in the skies above. Many adventurers were not even in airships, free-floating in the air or even approaching through the water. The Builder's force had many constructs designed to operate in the water, along with abominations modified not from intelligent races but sharks and other deadly denizens of the deep. Fighting underwater was not a weakness to the Adventure Society forces, however. The Sea of Storms had no shortage of people adept in aquatic environs.

The Builder's forces were much more numerous than those of the adventurers. Along with creations designed to swim or fly on their own, more were delivered into battle via airship, triggering ship-to-ship battle between the two sides. While the Builder had the quantity, however, the adventurers had the quality. The mass-produced creations were no match for well-trained adventurers, and the Storm Kingdom's adventurers were certainly that. While most might not be on the level of a Rimaros guild member, even those with Thadwick attitudes did not have Thadwick aptitudes. The Adventure Society branches in the Sea of Storms would not allow it.

Compared to the eclectic creations of the Builder cult, whose essence users served more as leadership, the adventurers were all people. Only their familiars and summons added more extreme diversity to their line-up. The Builder's creations were much more varied, with winged serpents, multi-headed crocodiles and giant sharks either entirely artificial or grotesque combinations of steel, stone and flesh.

Many of the creations were much larger than almost everything on the adventurer side. The only things the adventurers fielded to keep up were a few massive summons, each of which made an impression. From the huge cloud with seven hydra heads dangling from it to the dragon made of loose boulders, held together by electricity, they cut formidable figures. None, however, could match the size of the Builder cult's largest creation.

As the battle began, the adventurers could sense something vast moving in the deeps. From the air above they could make out a leviathan silhouette in the water before it finally moved to the surface and erupted out. It was a massive lamprey; a diamond rank abomination of flesh and decaying metal. Its sides were plated in pitted steel, its maw ringed with rusted iron teeth. It lunged from the water like the grasping arm of some

monstrous sea god. It rose hundreds of metres without revealing the full length of its body. Two low-flying airships were engulfed whole before it reached the peak of its lunge and splashed back on the water with a booming slap as its body fell flat, kicking off massive waves.

The battle had two aspects. One was the diamond-rank powerhouses for each side. They would keep each other in check as any diamond-ranker the other side couldn't account for would rampage through the lower ranks of the enemy. The adventurers had six diamond-rank essence users, while the floating city deployed only two. They had to rely on other diamond-level powers, like the flesh-abomination lamprey.

The Builder cult's great equaliser was the city itself. Like an iceberg, most of it was below the water, making it much larger than it seemed from the surface. This was not news; the city had been scouted and the adventurers knew its true size. What they didn't know was what that humungous bulk contained behind the sealed, underwater walls.

Below the surface, ten massive panels opened up on the city's exterior. From the resulting apertures emerged massive tentacles of segmented steel, so large they either occupied the bulk of the city's internal space or were contained in a dimensional storage space with unheard-of scope. The Builder cult's floating city turned out to be a city-sized kraken construct.

The tentacles rose from the water, each one a diamond-rank construct in its own right. Their massive length and bulk needed no special features; just swaying in the air allowed them to swat airships from the sky with monumental force.

Pandemonium reigned as the sky over the kraken-city become barely comprehensible, let alone navigable. Normally dominant silver-rankers were more reliant on luck than their abilities for survival. Builder airships staged ramming and boarding actions while adventurers flung around powers that filled the air with clouds of energy and flashes of light, along with stranger and more eclectic effects. Trees grew out of clouds, extending vines to pull people from the decks of airships. Jade orbs flew around, hammering constructs out of the sky. One Builder airship grew arms and started attacking itself, the passengers being forced to battle their own ship.

The diamond-rankers, meanwhile, confronted one another. The adventurers had six in their number; Soramir conspicuous in his absence. One each faced off with the Builder cultists diamond-rankers, their clashes spelling doom for any lower-rankers nearby. Gold rankers had a chance to survive the collateral damage, but any silver that drifted too close was in imminent threat of annihilation. One diamond-ranker was attempting to hunt down

the lamprey while the remaining three were shielding the rest of their forces from the kraken tentacles.

The second aspect to the battle, after the diamond-rank powerhouses, was the gold and silver-rank forces on both sides. The objective of the adventurers was to invade the city, find and fight their way to its core mechanisms and destroy them. This was the role of the lower-rankers while the diamond-rankers kept their equivalents tied up.

The Builder's goal was to prevent this and drive away the adventurers, bleeding them without allowing them any gains. The Builder cult could much more rapidly replenish its forces in the aftermath; their creations might be weaker than essence users but were much easier to replace. Attrition and pyrrhic victories were to the cult's advantage.

As the battle progressed, the quality of the adventurer's force became increasingly telling. They were yet to break through the magical dome blocking access to the city, but their six diamond-rankers were slowly but surely proving superior. The same was true of the lower ranks, with the mass-produced creations of the cult failing to match the essence users. The high standard of the Storm Kingdom's adventurers was showing its worth.

The city's defence screen was a formidable thing, but no barrier in the world could hold off a diamond ranker for very long. Once the diamond ranker hunting the lamprey managed to slay the beast, she turned her attention to breaching the barrier. With myriad gold-rankers pounding away as well, it could only hold up so long. With the city's power source also driving the massive tentacles fending off even more diamond-rankers, there was a limit to what it could spare to maintain the shields. When it inevitably broke down, silver and gold-rankers poured into the city.

Six diamond-rankers acting together was a world-shaking force. The doom of the floating city was clearly coming, but it was extracting every drop of blood it could. In the wake of the battle, the adventuring strength of the Sea of Storms would be considerably diminished.

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A crew of pirates had been hovering around the periphery of the Storm Kingdom since the beginning of the monster surge and their bold captain, on hearing about the mobilisation, saw a once-in-a-lifetime chance to make a raid that would affix his name in the annals of pirate history - raiding Riaros itself.

Of the three major islands of Rimaros, Arnote was the least populous and least defended. Without the riches of Livaros or the people of Provo, its more powerful residents had always been the only protection it needed. But with the forces of Rimaros mobilised,

only a handful of teams remained. Most importantly, the only gold-ranker still present was the core user, Pelli, who was mayor of some village.

If enough monsters spawned in the area during this time – a good chance in the middle of a monster surge – then the defenders might well be drawn away from a juicy target long enough for a successful raid. For this reason, the captain had planted people in the towns of Arnote, with signal beacons to call the pirates in should the chance arise. This exact thing had happened, and the pirates had moved in on the town of Kasilaro.

At first, things had gone exactly as expected. The team stationed there were busy fighting monsters underwater, off the coast. The pirate's airship had swept in, the residents fleeing as the pirates kicked open doors, snatching anything of value. They even took the time to grab the pretty women and boys who looked fun to play with, which was around the point that things started going wrong.

The gold-ranker, Pelli, had arrived within expectations. Any gold-ranker could move swiftly enough that they would reach the town before the raiders had their fill of plunder. The captain was also a core-using gold-ranker, which was a rare rank amongst pirates. It had won him the prestige he enjoyed within the pirate circles and was the source of his current boldness. His part of the plan was to keep the gold-ranker busy while his first mate led the crew in continuing to loot the town.

Pelli did not want the collateral damage of her confrontation with the pirate captain to wreak havoc on Kasilaro and its residents, which was why she fought outside the town. As this exposed the town to the pirate's crew, she had called in backup.

In the town, the crew was hauling everything of value to the airship tethered to the ground, just beyond the town gates. They used carts and wagons pilfered from the townsfolk, as well as using the residents themselves as pack mules. Their activity centres on the town square, which made a useful transfer point for looted goods and had the main road running straight to the gates.

The crew began to notice that some of their number hadn't shown themselves in a while. At first, it hadn't been apparent. Those missing were the ones who'd grabbed a pretty boy or girl and dragged them into a building for some fun. When they took too long to re-emerge, the first mate became concerned. She grumbled to herself that they should have known better than to be so long about their sordid business, but pirates were not famous for discipline.

She was about to go looking for them when the presence of trouble was confirmed by the missing crew's reappearance. They came staggering out of buildings, stumbling and some falling over entirely. Their skin was blackened, their limbs withered and their eyes

were full of fear. As the rest of the crew noticed them emerging, they stopped hauling loot in the direction of the airship and looked around, worried.

“What happened?” the first mate asked after she marched up to the closest of the stricken still on their feet. The man opened his mouth to speak but only coughed black blood over her before falling to his knees. Then a cold voice spoke, echoed from points all around the town square, even though the speaker was nowhere to be seen.

“Did I say you could go?”

Long shadow arms emerged from dark doorways and alleys, grabbing the afflicted crew and dragging them back into the alleys and doorways they had just emerged from. Those still standing toppled over as they were all dragged into the darkness and disappeared.

The first mate was the strongest member of the crew short of the captain himself, but she couldn't sense the speaker with her senses. It was unlikely to be a gold ranker though, or he wouldn't be hiding. More likely, it was a stealth specialist looking to intimidate them. Unfortunately, she knew that her crew were bullies it would be likely to work on.

“It's just some adventurer,” she called outleaping up onto a wagon. “Hey, adventurer! Unless you want us to slaughter everyone in this town, you'd best show your face.”

Cruel laughter came from every shadow. Disconcertingly, even her own.

“I didn't come here to save them,” the cold voice informed her. “I came here to kill you.”

“Screw this,” one of the bronze-rank pirates said and broke out into a run. That triggered most of the others, only the few silver-rankers remaining behind. The pirates ran with the sun at their backs, their shadows stretched out in front of them. A dark figure rose from the shadow of the first pirate to run, grabbed him by the neck and gave a single sharp shake.

The fleeing pirates pulled to a stop as the figure dropped the pirate with the now-broken neck. He was shrouded in a dark cloak over robes the colour of dried blood. Two strange orbs floated around him like disembodied alien eyes. Two smaller versions of those eyes watched them from within a dark hood. He drew a sword with a black blade, marked with ominous red sigils.

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As the battle over the floating city raged, only one person stood on the coast to confront the approaching land city. The great fortress approached hidden in a storm of desert dust kicked up by its passage. Dawn raised an arm in the air and pointed to the sky. As she moved her hand, lines of fire lit up the sky, drawing out a ritual circle even more

vast than the dust cloud hiding the rolling city. When she started chanting, her words were like a tsunami, audible even over the cataclysmic sounds of the diamond-rankers battling above the ocean.

*“I call back to the origin of infinity. From the fires of creation were you born in the days before days, and from the fire shall you come again. The birth of all things marks the beginning of the end, for in creation is the promise of annihilation. In the place, the end has come, so bring forth the flames of beginning and let them mark the end.”*

Dawn’s words of fire and thunder carried out over the land and water, even the madness of the nearby battle coming to a momentary lull. All eyes present turned to see the grand summoning circle in the sky. The circled started to close in on itself, its lines entangling and folding over one another like a wire sculpture of white, yellow and orange. It took on the framework of a fiery bird of barely comprehensible immensity, flames lighting up to fill in the gaps and flesh out the great phoenix blanketing the dust storm below.

The sky started to darken as if the sun was trembling before a presence born of power older and greater than itself. Day turned to night as the flaming bird took on the role of a burning moon, lighting up the dark as the dust cloud beneath it burned away, combusting from the heat sweeping out from the awe-inducing firebird.

The land city was silhouetted in flames as the dust cloud was burned off around it. An apocalyptic column of fire descended from the cosmic phoenix’s body onto the heart of the city. From its wings came streamers of flame, twisting through the air on their way down to ravage the city’s outlying districts as the centre burned away.

An aura, more oppressive than anything the world had felt before, crashed down on the burning city. Even the diamond-rankers within, who had been readying to go and confront Dawn, were suppressed. The raw power on display did not belong to this world but to something greater; a force that belonged to the cosmos.

No defenders emerged from the city. No defences rose to protect it. The vast city of stone and steel was melted down like slag in a foundry, along with everything in it - living or otherwise. Dawn only had one chance to intervene and she used it to the absolute limit, showing the world a power it had never seen before and might never see again. Even the inhuman forces of the Builder, battling off the coast, took pause as they were struck dumb, shocked at the spectacle.

Such a vast power, so beyond the limits of the world into which it was summoned, could only last a short time. The burning light of the phoenix dimmed, the sun shining brighter again as the great phoenix grew dark, slowly turning to ash and drifting away.

Even with such a sight before them, the terrible carnage of the battle over the floating city battle could only be stalled for so long. As the ashen remains of the phoenix floated on the air like a volcano's expulsion, the brutal war resumed.

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"Thank you," Pelli said to Jason.

"I couldn't stop them all before they hurt and killed some of the townsfolk."

"I thought you didn't come to save them?"

"You heard that."

"I'm going to assume that was something you said so they wouldn't try taking hostages."

"Thank you."

"You didn't kill them all?"

"The bronze-rankers died too fast. The silver core users I was able to keep alive, but there was a woman who was more skilled than the others. No cores, maybe an ex-adventurer. Not guild level, but there was clearly some training there. I didn't take any chances with her. I felt the gold-ranker run off."

"I tried to finish him, but it's hard to kill a gold ranker, even when you are one. You need powers to outpace them, trap them or load them up with ongoing damage. Not an issue for you, I suppose."

"For me, the trick has always been taking them alive. I have a tool for that now, but in groups, the weak ones die too fast."

"You can kill them all as far as..."

Pelli trailed off as an aura unlike anything she had ever felt washed over the island. Then the sky started to go dark as the sun dimmed. Even from fifteen hundred kilometres away, the events to the northwest could be felt.

"What in the names of the sweet gods is that?" Pelli asked in a trembling voice. "It's not an eclipse. I've never felt power like that."

"That's my friend Dawn," Jason said.

"That's a person?"

"This is the power that lies between mortal and something else."

"I don't even know what that means."

"I don't think we're meant to. Not yet."

Jason turned his gaze from the northwest, where the aura was coming from, to the east and the direction of Livaros.

"Now it's time to see if she was right," he said.

“Right about what?”

“The Builder’s intentions.”

Even as the incredible aura continued to wash over the island, another vast and powerful aura erupted from where Jason was looking. It was distant, but large and high enough in the air to be visible. A massive manifestation of rainbow light had appeared in the sky.

“And right she was,” Jason said grimly.

“What is that?” Pelli asked a second time.

“That,” Jason said, “is a Builder fortress-city, appearing over Livaros.”

“But all our forces have gone to the north-west.”

“Not all,” Jason said. “Just most.”

“Who are left?” she asked. “There’s barely a token force left by the Adventure Society, right?”

“Yes,” Jason said. “It’s just them and your family.”