

Chapter 525

Stand at the Front

The royal family of the Storm Kingdom was very large. Every combat-trained member of silver-rank or above was gathered in a ballroom in the royal palace; one of the few rooms large enough to hold them all. From Zara and Vesper to Soramir and the Storm King, the only absent member of that group was Zila, who had gone northwest to fight in the battle there. Only untrained core users like Pelli were exempted from the family call to arms.

With them was the royal guard, all members of the Sapphire Crown guild, representatives from the Irios family and a contingent of clergy. Most of the churches' combat forces were also adventurers and had set out for the battles in the northwest. Even so, the churches had placed their core reserves under the command of the royal family for the defence of the city.

"The first part will not be the most critical," Soramir told them, standing before the gathering with the Storm King and Trenchant Moore flanking him. "What it will be is the hardest. We couldn't hold back more than one diamond-ranker or not only would the attack on the water city be less likely to succeed, but the Builder could realise that we were preparing for his sneak attack."

Soramir looked up through the glass ceiling of the ballroom in which they had gathered. All eyes followed his gaze to the mass of rainbow light floating high above, from which the Builder's fortress-city would soon emerge.

"I have no shame in claiming to be strong," Soramir said, "but I am not so strong that I can handle every diamond-rank threat the Builder cult will have ready for us. We can hope that the cult believed they would catch us unprepared and used their greater resources elsewhere, but to assume that would be folly. We can only operate under the assumption that whatever they send against us will be more than I can handle alone."

He gestured expansively around him.

"Our advantage is home territory. We know that the Builder cult has limited diamond-rank essence users and relies heavily on their creations and the power of the cities themselves. In this case, however, we can match them. We have our own city, with its own power, built up in the centuries since I founded this kingdom."

He nodded at the leader of the Irios family contingent.

“From the first days of this kingdom, the Irios family has built the walls that shield its people in times of crisis. The founder of their family was a man I called brother, and I know he would be as proud of what your family has become as I am of mine.”

He glanced at the Storm King with a smile.

“Every generation has made this kingdom stronger than the one before. Now the time has come to show this interloper who thinks he can destroy us the strength of what we have built together. We are the Storm Kingdom. Some of us carry the very name of this city. Others are its most staunch defenders or the architects of its defences. The people of this Kingdom have given all of us so much. Now, in our time of greatest crisis, we will show them that their faith in us was not in vain.”

Again Soramir looked up before turning his gaze back on the crowd in the room.

“The first step, as I said, will be the hardest. We have a great weapon, but the enemy stronghold is mighty. Our weapon must be carried into the heart of their city so we can be certain of destroying it. This means breaching the city's defences while its defenders wield the full force of their power against us. Normally, that task would fall to me, but I will not be free to do so while harassed by the cult's diamond-rankers. Fortunately, we are not alone. This entity has invaded our world, but our world has gods to watch over us. Archbishop, Rimmon, if you would?”

A man in the garb of the church of Knowledge stepped to the front to address the group.

“Even gods and beings like the Builder have rules,” the archbishop said. “The Builder has been pushing against the limits of those rules, which gives our gods the leeway to push back. Thus far, they have bided their time, waiting for the best opportunities. One of those opportunities is now. The gods are stepping forward to protect the people of the Storm Kingdom.”

Reassurance showed on the faces of the royal family, the Irios family and the royal guard. Soramir's speech was all well and good, but they were up against forces greater than any mortal. It was a relief to know the gods would be standing with them.

“Each of the gods will do what they can,” Archbishop Rimmon continued. “They have granted us, their representatives, miracles to aid the city. The archbishop of war will empower the city's defences beyond what should normally be possible. The archbishop of Ocean will have the sea itself aid us. Knowledge has revealed to me many secrets of the Builder city, from where to place our weapon to how to breach the defences without diamond-rank assistance.”

“This does not mean the task ahead of us is easy,” Soramir said. “Only that it is possible at all. Make no mistake: many of us will fall today. The price we pay for our Kingdom’s safety – for its very survival – will be high. But we will pay it, because that is our duty. Throughout the history of this kingdom, we have always stood at the top. Now the time has come for us to stand at the front.”

Jason’s team, minus Jason himself, were one of many teams given a device to carry into the city. Only one was the true bomb, but once the cult realised the objective of the Rimaros defenders, they would focus on stopping it. For that reason, many teams had been handed dummy devices, with the church of knowledge giving target locations within the city to activate it. As to which device and which target were the real ones, the people assigning tasks claimed not to know. Everyone would have to do their utmost to succeed in case they were the true hope for the city.

“It’s definitely not our team,” Neil said as they waited on an airship docked at a sky tower. “No way they gave us the real thing. The cult will probably put extra effort into killing us just for being Jason’s team, so giving it to us is a terrible idea.”

“It’ll be some gold-rank guild group,” Sophie said. “It’s too important to hand over to anyone but those with the best chance.”

“Unless that’s exactly what they want the cult to think,” Belinda said. “Maybe it is us.”

“It’s not,” Sophie said. “They’re telling everyone that no one knows who has the real thing but that’s just to motivate the rest of us. The ones who have the real thing know what they’ve got.”

“It would have been nice to have Gary, Rufus and Farrah with us,” Clive said.

“They have their own task,” Humphrey said. “Farrah is a formation magic expert and they need every one of those they can get. If we can’t breach the magical defences of the Builder city, none of this will work out.”

The rainbow light above the city was something between a portal and the manifestation effect of a monster or essence, without exactly being either. Only possible during the monster surge when the dimensional membrane of reality was in tatters, it faded away as it disgorged the Builder’s flying city.

It looked like a fairly normal city, except being in the sky. The city rested on a massive disc of stone with a massive and complex ritual circle engraved into the underside. The top of the city looked like any city built heavily of stone, with towers, streets and other buildings that looked remarkably ordinary for a flying city of doom. The defensive dome glimmering

over it was also common in major cities, although being visible when not actively being attacked was unusual.

The battle began with the lines of the massive ritual circle under the flying city lighting up, swiftly glowing brighter until a massive beam of red-white magic shot directly down at Livaros. The ritual circle was not the mechanism by which the city flew but a giant magic beam cannon.

Livaros itself was a city larger than the one flying above it, the entire island being urbanised. The protection that appeared to intercept the beam was not a dome, like that over the Builder city. It was a circular barrier of blue and green magical energy, looking much like a ritual circle. In the near-instantaneous moment the beam was descending, the shield appeared, then another behind it and a third behind that. The first shield wavered and then broke, even as shields continued to stack up. The second, third and fourth shields were broken through before the beam's energy was finally expended.

The glowing ritual circle under the flying city started to fade, the potent beam having pushed the ritual disc near the limit of its endurance. It would take time before it was able to fire again, and the disappearance of the beam was like the crack of a starting pistol. Airships full of adventurers started flying up from Livaros' sky docks, while cult airships passed through the flying city's dome before descending to meet them. Other enemies emerged as well, from constructs and abominations flying through the sky to the diamond-rank forces the defenders of Rimaros had been anticipating.

To Soramir's relief, as he flew up into the sky on a magical cloud, he only sensed one essence user at diamond rank. He sensed other diamond-rank auras, but essence users were always the greater threat. He had no illusions about defeating them all but if he could occupy the strongest of the Builder cult's forces, the gold and silver-rankers had a real chance to secure victory and protect Rimaros.

As he ascended, Soramir gathered power around himself, conjuring water and air to shroud himself in a miniaturised hurricane. With diamond-rank speed, it took only moments to clash with his cultist counterpart, where it immediately became apparent that Soramir was stronger. That was not the same as being in a domineering position, however, as no diamond-ranker should be underestimated.

There were two other diamond-rank auras on the cultist side. One was a massive construct bird with four wings. Unlike the essence user, Soramir was confident he would be able to destroy it given the chance, although that chance was unlikely to be forthcoming. The last diamond-rank aura was strange and diffuse, which Soramir found almost as concerning as the essence user. He had sensed that kind of aura before,

recognising it as the signature of swarm-type entities. As predicted, a swarm of constructs, sharing a single aura, came pouring out of the flying city's defence dome.

The diamond-rank conflict was the key to the early stage of the battle, as the Rimaros defenders needed the freedom to breach the defences of the flying city. Formation specialists, many of whom were from the Irios family, were being carried into battle on airships, along with protective escorts. The greatest danger to them wasn't the cult forces but the collateral damage from a diamond-rank battle that was just beginning.

Soramir's storm powers were formidable in the face of multiple opponents, which was exactly what he needed when outnumbered. They were effective against the swarm constructs which, like many swarm-type enemies, were vulnerable to wide-area attacks. The drawback of Soramir's expansive powers was that the lower ranks of both sides had to stay well clear.

While much of the swarm was struggling against Soramir's storm powers, clusters of the swarm managed to escape in isolation, separating from the main swarm to hunt the lower-ranked Rimaros forces. They were still diamond-rank, but their components, - fist-sized locust constructs – were individually frail for their rank. With their numbers reduced in the smaller swarms, the gold rank adventurers were able to put up a fight.

The battle quickly turned to chaos as the Rimaros airships tried to fight their way to the underside of the city through storms of battle and powers flying back and forth which included actual storms. The formation magic specialists needed to be delivered to the flying city's underside.

Using the information given to them by the goddess of Knowledge, they knew there were nodes not visible from a ground level on the city's ritual disc. If enough of them were impacted by the right rituals, also provided by knowledge, they could bring down the magic dome and expose the city to invasion.

The flying city's beam weapon recharged before any of the Rimaros forces managed to fight their way to it. In the chaos of battle, many from both sides failed to move out of its path in time as it once more hammered at the city below. The flying city needed to be breached before Livaros was cracked open by the repeated beams.

Livaros did not helplessly wait to suffer more attacks. Magic circles, similar to the shield it used, appeared over the city and fired back beams of its own. They weren't anything like the magnitude of those the flying fortress used, and wouldn't be enough to damage the ritual circle of the underside of the city. The flying city, however, was not the target. The Irios family members controlling the defences aimed the beams at the swarm construct, attempting to thin it out as much as possible and take pressure off of Soramir.

Perhaps intimidated by the wild auras from the battle above Livaros and in the aftermath of Dawn's actions, the monster activity that had been raging around Arnote had gone quiet. It had been unusually busy, even for a monster surge, but now it had fallen off entirely.

Jason found himself back at home with Travis and Taika, their bronze-ranks leaving them in the role of civilian. Pelli had joined Jason at his cloud house and they all sat on an upper-floor deck, watching the distant battle. They could make out little at such a distance but they watched nonetheless.

"I feel helpless," Travis said.

"Travis, you're the one who made this battle even viable," Jason assured him.

"Without you, things would have been even more desperate."

"Assuming it even works," Travis said.

"Bro, at least you got to do something," Taika said. "All I could do was sit here."

"You're doing something," Jason assured him.

"I am?"

"Damn right you are."

"What am I doing?"

"Looking good. You're a big, sexy chocolate drop."

"Thanks, bro," Taika said brightly. "That's nice of you to say."

Farrah was drawing in the air with her finger, leaving behind lines of flame that formed ritual circles as she continued to draw. Their airship was hovering under one of the nodes on the underside of the city, each barely the size of a basketball. The airship was being attacked by flying cult creations and enemy airships, the adventurers around her desperately keeping the enemies away from her.

Rufus was a monster, smoothly dashing around with his golden sword. Everywhere he went, a construct fell apart, its neatly cut halves glowing with heat. Gary didn't have the skill to match some of the guild adventurers around him but his specialty tools more than made up the difference. He had long ago crafted weapons specialised in fighting cult creations and his hammer was practically ordnance as it smashed apart constructs, sending waves of force behind the shattered enemies to batter its fellows. His shield grew and shrank as he used it to shield Farrah, the way he had failed to do years ago when she died. He let out all his pent up rage, his roars blasting enemies overboard.

The Rimaros forces managed to take down the dome over the flying city, although the price was high. Many adventurers threw their lives away getting the formation experts to the underside of the city disc to perform their work. Once it was done, airships poured up and over to invade the city.

The diamond-rank defenders moved to stop them. Soramir had managed to destroy the weakest of them, the bird construct, but the essence user was predictably resilient. As for the swarm, that was more troublesome. The beams from below, the gold-rankers fighting it and Soramir himself had managed to shave off a large portion of it, but much remained. It continued to calve off smaller swarms to hunt the Rimaros adventurers, chasing them into the city.

The city itself was an odd mix of familiar and alien to the adventurers moving through it. Stone streets and buildings were not that different from what might be found in a normal city, but the denizens that came out to fight them certainly were. Cultists led packs of their bizarre creations, ranging from humanoid magic cyborgs to floating ring constructs that shot beams of energy.

Ramon Keel was a member of the anti-Builder task force. He was in charge of organising a beachhead in the city and called out as he spotted a group of silver-rank adventurers.

“Hey!”

The group came over, recognising Keel. They had all passed through assessment by Keel’s unit when they registered for monster surge activity.

“Yes, sir,” Humphrey said by way of acknowledgement.

“You’re Asano’s team, right?” Keel asked.

“That’s right,” Humphrey confirmed.

“If I remember correctly, you have multiple portal and storage powers between you right?”

“We do,” Humphrey said.

“Great. I’m assigning you all to logistics, search and recovery. We’re setting up a medical camp here. You’re going to find and bring in the injured, portal them to the city as needed and portal back extra supplies.”

“Sir, we have one of the devices. For all we know, it might be the one.”

“It’s definitely not,” Keel said. “Asano annoys the Builder more than he does me, so he might swat all of you just for fun. There’s no way they gave you the real thing.”

“See?” Neil asked. “What did I tell you?”

“Sir,” Humphrey said. “Given the stakes, I’m not sure we should be taking that risk.”

“Fine,” Keel said. “Pull out your device.”

Clive looked to Humphrey, who nodded. Clive opened his rune portal storage space and pulled out a device the size of a hiking backpack. Keel took a crystal from his pocket and held it near the device. The crystal turned red.

“There you go,” Keel said. “Dummy device confirmed. Now stop asking questions and do what I tell you.”

The adventurers fought their way through the city and into the deeper reaches through tunnels descending underground. The sense of alienness grew in the subterranean depths that were filled with industrial centres akin to foundries and ore refineries. Hot and humid, they were filled with dark corners and orange light. Tunnel warrens led deeper down into the city’s core where the most important parts of the city were secured.

Liara Rimaros had the true destructive device and, as Sophie predicted, had been told its actual nature. She moved with two of her team members; the brother and sister pair Ledev and Jana. The trio of gold-rank stealth specialists had been chosen as most likely to deliver the device successfully, which had largely proven true. After the dome went down they had quickly penetrated the city, finding their way into the depths.

As they moved deeper, however, it grew increasingly difficult to move undetected through cramped tunnels filled with increasingly dangerous fixed defences. They had been forced to fight through more and more constructs anchored in place to move forward, slowing their progress. The stealth specialists excelled at surprise attacks, not breaching emplaced defences.

They were caught up in running battles as the fight from the higher levels of the city started to catch up to their increasingly stalled progress. The only benefit was that people from their own side started to reach them, teaming up for the final push.

They joined a group that was mostly made up of adventurers whose teams had been split up by chaos or casualty. They had found one another and grouped up to push forward. It was a mixed group of golds and silvers, including Vesper and Jeni Kavaloa, whose team Vesper had been assigned to for the invasion.

When Liara revealed they had the true device, the group pulled out all the stops to get them to their destination. They knew that any cost was worthwhile to get it to the target zone. More than one sacrifice was made to get them closer, but as they approached the

location, they were set upon by multiple groups of fresh cult defenders in quick succession.

The problem facing the group was that once placed, they needed to escape before the device detonated. The ideal scenario had been the stealth team placing the device and it going undiscovered, but that no longer seemed viable. In a lull between groups, Vesper addressed Liara.

“We’re close now,” Vesper told her. “Close enough that you can sneak the rest of the way if the rest of us grab enough attention.”

“Vesper...” Liara said.

“We don’t have time to argue, Liara.”

There was no time to argue and the hasty plan was put into motion. Liara only paused a moment before hugging Vesper, nodding and moving off, her stealth powers rendering her invisible. Her brother and sister teammates did the same.

The rest of the group moved to attack the converging cultists and trigger the emplaced defences while the stealth trio moved on. Where they previously avoided facing too many defenders at once, they now grabbed as much attention as they were able. They fought hard and savagely as Liara’s trio avoided the final defenders between themselves and the target location.

Although Liara’s senses were reined in to avoid attention, the other group was close enough that she could sense their auras being snuffed out one by one. She stopped as she felt Vesper’s aura wink out, steeling her resolve and stopping her aura from revealing their location with emotional turbulence. Liara only allowed herself a brief pause before continuing and they reached the target zone undetected. They took out the device and set it up in accordance with the instructions they were given. Unlike the people given dummy devices, the directions were more involved than ‘push the big red button and run.’

“Now we go,” Liara said when the job was done.

“Not me,” Ledev said and his sister paled.

“Ledev, no.”

“There are still too many defenders roaming around,” Ledev insisted. “Of the three of us, I’m the only one with the power to hide this object from their senses now it’s out of its storage space and active.”

“Brother...”

Liara’s hand fell on Jana’s shoulder.

“He’s right, Jana. He can hide it for as long as it takes them to find him, buying everyone as much time to get out as possible before he sets it off.”

One of the functions added to the dummy devices was that they would signal when the real device was activated, letting the adventurers know to retreat. From the moment the device had been turned on, the Rimaros forces had been pulling out.

Jana clasped her brother in a death grip hug until he pushed her off.

“Time to go,” he told her, then turned to Liara. “Just make sure the statue of me looks good, yeah?”

The detonation didn't cause the flying city to explode. It trembled in the air, spiderweb cracks appearing on the underside of the disc. Geysers of force blasted out from the city above and the underside disc, blasting chunks of stone like giant cannonballs in every direction. The buildings of the city toppled as the interior of the floating city was annihilated by the nuclear bomb turned resonating-force device.

Even so, the main mass of the city held together, although the magic holding it aloft was gone. With incredible ponderousness, it started to fall from the sky.

Below the flying city, Soramir gathered up all the power at his disposal, ignoring the diamond-rank essence user who took the chance to land savage attacks. Gold rankers moved to defend Soramir as he conjured up a vast and powerful storm in an attempt to slow and shift the trajectory of the falling island that threatened to land atop Livaros.

More adventurers attempted to help, from telekinetic powers to just braving Soramir's storm to fly up to the falling city and push. Others dropped down, recognising that even if the fortress city missed the island, it would create a massive tsunami. Rimaros had no shortage of water essence users and they moved down to the island to prepare for what was about to come.

Two figures rose up from Livaros below, flying into the air. Both were garbed in the robes of clergy and their auras soared as they were filled with the power bestowed on them by their gods to protect the city. The Archbishop of Wind raised her arms and a great, focused and continual blast of wind started pushing on the falling city. Gold-rankers attempting to help were blasted away, but it didn't matter as the divine power shifted the trajectory of descent.

Seeing the power at hand, the diamond-rank cultist started fleeing, which many of the cult's airships were already doing.

The other clergywoman, the Archbishop of Ocean, became the vessel for her god's power and directed the sea to rise up. So vast was the quantity of water forming a rising column under the descending city that the sea level visibly dropped. The city struck the

column, triggering an explosion of water that immediately sent rain falling over Livaros. The watery pillar slowed the descent of the plummeting city, turning a plunge into a drop.

When it reached sea level, the city was still a massive falling object, displacing vast amounts of water to trigger a tsunami, but the Archbishop of Ocean was not done. She channelled more divine power, arresting the movement of the great wave and settling it back into the sea before it could strike Livaros or sweep out in search of other shores.

The fallen and collapsed city was too large to be entirely submerged, forming a new island off the coast of Livaros. Total disaster had been averted and Rimaros protected, but the death toll amongst adventurers was devastating. It would take time to fully count, but the royal family and their guard contingent had been ravaged, as had the other adventurers who fought for Rimaros instead of heading north.

Jason's team had come through intact, courtesy of their assigned role putting them in relative safety and giving them plenty of time to evacuate and help others to do the same. The moment they were certain they were safe, they found the Shade body Jason had left in the Livaros to inform him they had survived.