

Chapter 611

The God in This Scenario

“I can’t believe his majesty went along with this,” Liara muttered as she rode an elevating platform into the bowels of the sky island.

“Dinner and a show,” Jason said. “What’s not to like?”

A vast amount of infrastructure was in the underground portions of the flying island on which the royal palace and residential sectors for royalty and foreign diplomats were located. A large part of that was underwater docking stations where vehicles could arrive in an airlock where the water was pumped out, allowing the passengers to disembark. This was where most of the royal palace traffic arrived, comprised of supply deliveries, palace staff and government functionaries.

The lake at the heart of the royal palace was more naturalistic on the surface, but underneath it was a perfect ring. The sections of it not occupied by docks offered magically reinforced glass walls that made for interesting office spaces and other rooms that abutted the lake below the surface.

One such room was the old duelling area, which was, like the ballroom they had just left, a stadium-scale space, both horizontally and vertically. People were swarming down from the ballroom for a chance to watch the upcoming duels, but most were heading for the audience seating. Those heading for the main area were the royal family, various key attendants, the actual duellists and a few attendants.

“The duelling arena has been used as a training hall by the Sapphire Crown guild for years,” Trenchant Moore explained. He was on the elevating platform with Jason and Liara, as well as Sophie, Humphrey, Zareen, Rufus and Rufus’ mum.

“You’re sure Callum isn’t behind the people breaking into my pagoda?” Jason asked Arabelle.

“I’ve been very clear with him on this,” Arabelle said. “Also, he received quite the impression last time he tried.”

“That doesn’t mean he didn’t send someone else to try,” Jason told her. “People do things that are stupid and make no sense all the time. Myself very much included.”

“Jason, my job is helping people with their mental issues. You think I don’t know what people are like?”

“You help people because they need it and come to you,” Jason said. “I get the ones who lack that much self-awareness. Instead of going to you, they try to murder me. Or

kidnap. Honestly, if you discount monsters, I see more attempts to kidnap that kill me. Does that make me popular?"

"Are you sure you shouldn't be going to deal with the people breaking into your house?" Liara asked.

"I'm a silver ranker," Jason said. "What am I going to do to a bunch of gold rankers?"

"You're sure they're gold rankers?" Arabelle asked.

"I am," Jason said.

"How?" Arabelle asked.

"They're still alive. Okay, that's just me being dramatic; I can sense them."

"You shouldn't be able to," Liara said. "The defences around this sky island are as powerful as any in the world. It should cut off everything."

"Does it prevent gods from speaking with their servants?" Jason asked.

"No," Liara said.

"Then it doesn't cut off everything," Jason pointed out.

"Between you and the cloud house, who is the god in this scenario?"

"I refuse to answer on the grounds that I may incriminate myself. And it's not like they're good gold-rankers. They're all core users."

"All of them?" Zareen asked. "At gold rank, core users are less common than people who trained up properly. Are they a bunch of craftspeople or something?"

"I'll ask them when I get home," Jason said. "I have something to be getting on with first... oh, it looks like they've decided to cut their losses and get out. They've started breaking through walls."

"Then you won't be talking to them when you get home," Liara said.

"Maybe, maybe not. They haven't realised yet that I keep moving the room they're in to the middle of the building."

Four men forcefully broke through a wall, arriving in another of a series of empty square rooms.

"What did I tell you?" Jedrin asked as the wall they just broke through reformed behind them. "No one pays four gold rankers to come a quarter of the way around the planet to rob some silver ranker's house."

"Shut up, Jedrin."

They were all uneasy. Their senses failed to extend beyond any of the walls and they had stopped finding furnished rooms. Each wall they broke through led them to one empty box after another. There was a pervasive sense that they were trespassing and there

seemed to be formidable power behind it. They couldn't even be certain that power was real, however, as their senses barely brushed against it and it was not something that belonged in a silver-rank construct. It could easily have been their imaginations, except that they had each felt it.

The result was that they quickly found themselves unnerved, and it only got worse. Once they had broken into the house, they had moved through a series of ordinary rooms until they found themselves in a room that was just a plain box. There were no windows and even the door vanished, sealing them in. That was the point they decided to call it quits and started smashing through walls to escape, but each new room was a new empty box.

"Get bent, Kirk," Jedrin said. "I should have told you to shut up when you wanted to take this job. It's not like we're some infiltration experts. The only reason to go that far for us is that it's how far you have to go to find someone who doesn't know how stupid an idea it is."

"I said shut up."

"And I asked why anyone would go that far and pay that much for us? And now we know it's because the people paying attention clearly looked into this job and said no."

"How about you both shut up," William said.

"Exactly," Ray said. "Arguing won't get us out of here."

"Neither will breaking through walls," Jedrin said. "We've gone further than the width of the entire building, yet here we are. Either the rooms are moving or there's dimensional manipulation going on."

"Which we can't tell because our senses won't go through the damn walls," William said.

"If you have a better idea, let's hear it," Ray said.

"I have a better idea," Jedrin said. "Remember when I said that getting portalled in right before the job was a bad idea because it didn't give us a chance to do any research into the target?"

"That's not a better idea," Kirk said. "That's you passive-aggressively bragging - again - about how you didn't want to do the thing that you did right along with the rest of us. Again."

"Maybe let me finish?" Jedrin asked. "My point is that I did do a little research."

"We were told not to, specifically to prevent alerting the target," Kirk said. "And now we're stuck in a trap. Good job."

“Do you seriously think that me doing some research on a different continent was enough that all this was set up specifically to deal with us?” Jedrin asked.

“He’s right, Kirk,” William said. “I’m pretty sure that they just didn’t want us finding out why no one else took the job.”

“They just didn’t want to use locals so it didn’t come back on them,” Kirk argued.

“If you’ll stop interrupting,” Jedrin interjected, “I can get to what my research uncovered.”

“Then stop flapping your mouth and get to it,” Kirk said.

“What did you find?” William asked.

“Not much,” Jedrin said. “It was short notice and I wanted to be careful. What I did find was that the guy who owns this place won a cloud flask from Emir Bahadir in some contest in the middle of nowhere. It was a big deal, with nobles sending a bunch of their young people to compete.”

“Emir Bahadir the treasure hunter?” William asked.

“That’s the one,” Jedrin said. “The point is that I found out that the house we were hired to rob was a cloud construct.”

“Oh, that’s really helpful,” Kirk said snidely. “I hate to break it to you, Jedrin, but we already knew that.”

“Now that we’re here, sure,” Jedrin said. “But I knew before. Long enough before that I knew we’d be breaking into a cloud house, and therefore had time to bring a contingency plan.”

“What kind of contingency plan?” Ray asked.

Jedrin reached into the dimension bag at his hip and pulled out a box the size of a small suitcase, complete with handle. It was made of pale grey ceramic with dark metal covering the corners. A complex array of sigils was engraved into the surface of the ceramic, on each side of the box.

“What is that?” Kirk asked.

“It’s a thaumic cohesion impedance device,” Jedrin said.

“A what?” Ray asked while William backed away from it.

“What in the sweet gods are you doing with that thing?” William asked. “They are very, very illegal.”

“We’re breaking into someone’s house, William,” Kirk said. “We’re already doing crime.”

“We’re doing the kind of crime that means our families have to pay a fine if we get caught,” William hissed. “Jedrin just turned it into the kind of crime where the Adventure Society crawls up inside us and builds a rustic cottage.”

Ray looked at William, then the device.

“I think you need to explain what this thing is right now.”

“It’s—” Jedrin began, only for Ray to cut him off immediately.

“Not you,” Ray said, pointing at Jedrin before moving his finger to point at William. “You.”

“It’s a device for breaking down things made of magic. Not things that are magical, but things actually made of manifested magic. Conjured objects, spirit coins.”

“It’s the perfect thing for trashing a cloud construct,” Jedrin said. “Which you all know that we could very much use right now. That’s my better idea; you’re welcome.”

“You know what else is made of magic?” William asked. “We are. We’re gold rankers, so our bodies are made of magic. It’s why we don’t die when we get stabbed in the head.”

“If it’s going to affect us,” Ray said, “then I think that more specifics on exactly what you mean by ‘breaking down’ would be something worth hearing.”

“It means,” William said, “turning manifested magic, meaning magic that’s taken solid form, back into non-manifested magic. Like when a monster dies and it turns into rainbow smoke.”

Ray backed off alongside William.

“I’m not interested in turning into rainbow smoke today.”

“I didn’t bring something that would kill us, you idiots.”

“I’m sure you didn’t,” William said. “That’s why they made them incredibly illegal. How did you even get one?”

“I know a guy,” Jedrin said.

“What guy?” Kirk asked.

“Sak.”

“Sak?” Ray explained. “That guy definitely sold us out.”

“To who?” Jedrin asked.

“To anyone he could,” William said. “It’s Sak. Why would you ever consider buying something that illegal from him? And where did he even get it?”

“He knows a guy too.”

“What guy?” Ray asked.

“I don’t know,” Jedrin said, increasingly defensive. “He had a hat.”

“A hat?” Kirk asked.

“Yes, a hat. A big hat.”

“Oh,” William said, his tone suddenly convinced. “You should have said that he had a *big* hat. That makes it perfectly alright to BUY VERY ILLEGAL MAGIC DEVICES FROM A COMPLETE STRANGER RECOMMENDED BY THE LEAST TRUSTWORTHY PERSON IN THE ENTIRE COUNTRY!”

“Just so I’m following this correctly,” Ray said, “you bought a massively illegal device that will melt us, assuming that the random man with a big hat you brought it from wasn’t lying about what it is. A man you went to on the advice of a person most famous for selling out the people he works with.”

“It sounds bad when you say it like that,” Jedrin said. “And it won’t melt us. These things are optimised to break down amorphous substances replicating rigid substances. Heavy conjured armour and cloud houses. Will it string us a bit? Yes. But right now we’re trapped on the wrong continent for a job we never should have taken in a house of infinite boxes. A house that I’m fairly certain hates us. So, we can stay here, waiting for someone to find us with this incredibly illegal device, or we can set it off to get us out of here and wipe out the evidence in the process.”

The four men looked at each other and the box they were trapped in. After more back-and-forth arguing, they finally agreed to set off the device, but not in the room they were in. They would set it to activate and breach into another room, putting a wall between them and the device.

Their precautions meant little as the device detonated. The room around them was disintegrated, and plenty more besides. Suddenly there was a massive sphere-shaped absence of anything in the middle of the pagoda, everything in the space having been utterly annihilated. Partly destroyed rooms were exposed, sending furniture tumbling through levels.

“I feel tingly,” Kirk said.

All four men had closed their eyes, wincing as it felt like sandpaper had been rubbed all over their skin. They had fallen as the room they were in was destroyed and they opened their eyes to see the destruction. The hole the device had ripped in the place had dropped them into a mezzanine level with access to a large open atrium with a wall that let them see outside. The air was filled by a hazy mist that was the dissipated remains of what had previously been walls, floors and ceilings.

“Okay, we can get out,” Jedrin said. “I told you that... Kirk, where are your clothes?”

“I wear conjured clothes,” Kirk said. “Just from a magic item, nothing special. Easier than owning a bunch of different stuff.”

“Do you have the item on you?” Jedrin asked.

“Yes.”

“Then how about you put on some damn pants before we make a run for it?”

“I think it’s a little late for that,” William said and the others joined him in looking around. Dark figures, each with a large alien eye instead of a face, were swarming out of the rooms that had been rent open.

“They’re silver-rank,” Jedrin said. “We can fight our way through.”

The haze suddenly coalesced in the centre of the space forming a giant blue and orange eye. Then the four men’s flesh started to rot.

Chapter 612

The Only Person Who Thinks It's Obvious

On one side of the duelling area, the entire wall was made up of reinforced glass, behind which was the lake at the heart of the sky island. Specially reared aquatic creatures, unfazed by the regular water traffic, swam around in the water. It was an impressive backdrop for anyone viewing from the seats that made up the other side of the area, also behind reinforced glass.

There were VIP viewing booths into which the palace stewards were expertly guiding the more prestigious attendees, dealing with the etiquette protocols on the fly. There were also ready areas at each end, behind massive doors. In the one set aside for Jason, Rufus, Sophie and Humphrey, they were accompanied by their friends and several others. Trenchant Moore, Zareen and Liara were all in attendance.

Jason was staring into the middle distance, his expression blank.

"Mr Moore," he said. "I'm going to go see Young Master de Varco about final details. If you would be kind enough to lead my friend to that viewing booth you mentioned.

"Of course, Mr Asano. And Princess Liara, His Majesty has asked after you."

"What about the men in your pagoda?" Zareen asked Jason.

"They're contained," he said, his tone matter-of-fact.

"What does that mean?" Liara asked. "We're going to need to talk to them. I know your pagoda is intimidating, but it's still a silver-rank construct. Four gold rankers might be able to break out of they're determined enough."

"I've calibrated the house to keep rotting their flesh at roughly the same rate as their gold-rank recovery attributes will heal it," Jason said. "It will keep them debilitated until I attend them myself."

"Jason," Rufus said in a worried voice.

"Rufus, you remember the joke back in Greenstone right?" Jason asked. His voice held the whimsy of a man certain the police wouldn't find the family before he'd had his fun. "It turns out I *am* the man with the evil powers. I've already taught one world that."

As Jason strode out of the room Humphrey also went to talk to him, but Arabelle gestured him to stop. She looked to Farrah, who left to trail Jason.

"Am I missing something?" Zareen asked. "Or is he remotely torturing a group of gold rankers? From here."

"Your mother once approached me about the gap in Jason's Adventure Society records during his time away," Arabelle told her. "I refused to share what I knew, but I

advocated against Jason participating in political games. I told her that he should be sent away with his team, which I believe she agreed with, to her credit. The choice was made at higher levels within the Adventure Society and royal family both, if I'm not mistaken."

"You're not," Liara confirmed.

"You may get your wish of learning about Jason's time away after all, milady," Arabelle said. "If you put Jason in a political mess, try to exploit him and then make moves on him behind his back—"

"We didn't," Liara said.

"Someone did," Arabelle said. "And that's what happened in that missing time. It happened a lot, and now you're seeing what Jason does when that happens. Put him in that mindset and his instincts are to trust no one and kill everyone. To put aside his principles whatever it costs him because that's what it takes when the world is against you and everyone coming for you has more power."

"It's not like that," Humphrey said. "This is a different world. And he has us."

"Which I strongly advise to remind him of before his duel," Arabelle said. "Especially if you're interested in de Varco still wanting to be an adventurer after."

Farrah followed Jason into the hall, which was a plain brick tunnel. To those who didn't know how expensive the bricks were, it lacked the opulence of a royal palace. To those who did, it was practically a treasury. Entering the tunnel, Farrah was ready to rush to catch Jason, but found him leaning his forehead against the wall.

"I thought I was better," he said.

"You are."

"I've been sitting around in the tropics, thinking I wasn't the same. But when push came to shove, it took one day. One day, and I'm back to the same savage, reactionary violence I was doing on Earth."

"You are better, Jason, even if you don't see it."

"I'm torturing a bunch of strangers as we speak."

"Then stop," Farrah said lightly.

Jason pushed himself off the wall and turned to look at her, expression cold.

"No."

She flashed him a smile.

"You know what you remind me of right now? You, back in Greenstone. Getting some kills under your belt and wondering what was becoming of you."

“And now we know what became of me. I wouldn’t have been willing to do what I’m doing back then.”

“No, you wouldn’t. But on Earth, you wouldn’t have been beating yourself up over it, either. On Earth, you killed without a moment’s consideration of whether it was right because you didn’t have the luxury. You didn’t have time for right or wrong, only for what was necessary.”

“I took it too far, Farrah. You are what you do, and what I did was put aside my principles.”

“But now you’re pondering them again, and that’s good. Keep questioning. But that brutal part of you, that can do what’s necessary – it’s necessary too. Some days you’re going to need it. But you can also put it back in the box, and that’s the difference. On Earth, you were a diamond knife, sharp but brittle. You were never soft, and every time you got a little sharper, you were always on the verge of breaking.”

He bowed his head.

“You kept me from breaking.”

“Barely. But you have more people now, and you are different, Jason. I see it, even if you don’t. You’re not as soft as you started out, but also not as hard as you became. Right now you have a balance; you can do the hard things without losing yourself in doing them. I know you’re still getting the hang of maintaining it, but we’re here to help you. You just have to let us.”

“Crap. I’m the fragile, high-maintenance one, aren’t I?”

Farrah laughed.

“You’re only just figuring that out? Look, if you deny what you learned about yourself on Earth, it’s going to devour you from the inside out. But you can’t let it dominate you, either. Compartmentalise. Keep it in the box where it belongs and pull it out when you need it. I’m not telling you anything you don’t know.”

“You’re sounding a lot like Arabelle.”

“We talked about you a lot. She wanted to know about your world and our time there from someone other than you, so she could better help you. And she did, even if you maybe don’t see it right now. But I see it, so you’ll just have to trust me.”

Jason smiled.

“I can do that. Are you sure you won’t come with us when we leave Rimaros?”

“You have a portal power and I’m inventing the magic phone. It’s not like you’re going back to Earth and I won’t see you for a decade. Which means you’ll be getting plenty more

advice from me, starting with this: Don't make this Hector guy quit being an adventurer due to mental trauma. He's not the one who broke into your house."

"They set off some kind of bomb in there," Jason said. "Blew a giant hole in the middle."

"They're gold rankers. Even if they're crap gold rankers, they could still throw a garbage truck like a basketball."

"Did you watch a lot of sports on Earth?"

"No, Jason. There was a bunch of giant, athletic men running around in tight outfits and I thought to myself, 'that's not for me.' Is the pagoda intact?"

"Not really. I'm going to have to return it to the flask and reproduce it."

"Don't," Farrah said. "Pack up and go tonight. Be gone by first light. It's past time you hit the road and had those adventures we promised you back in Greenstone."

"There's still stuff to do. People to collect. I haven't even decided if the royal family get to—"

"They don't. As for the people who are going with you, I'll let them know to get ready. If they don't, go without them; they'll catch up or they won't. You're the high-maintenance one, remember? Let them work around you."

Sophie's opponent was an elf with the sword, shield, myriad and arsenal essences. Her fighting style combined mobility with conjured swords and shields that floated around her to fight the enemy on their own. Using quick abilities to conjure the weapons bought time for her to cast more powerful spells.

The many shields, conjured over and over, moved into Sophie's path as she attempted to slip through with her speed. At the same time, Sophie was bombarded with swords that she needed to smash out of the air. They would just keep hunting her, making it harder and harder as more swords were conjured up.

Fortunately for Sophie, her Radiant Fist and Immortal Fist powers gave her disruptive-force and resonating-force damage respectively, ideally suited for crushing rigid, conjured tools. Even so, they were accumulating faster than she was breaking them down.

The early advantage was with the elf. Sophie initially dodged through the conjured defenders multiple times to attack her, but Sophie's strikes simply didn't do enough damage and she was repeatedly forced to back off from counterattacks. The elf was more of a ranged than melee combatant, but no one with the sword essence was a slouch up close. With floating swords and shields harassing her, Sophie wasn't able to push the attack for long.

The count of swords and shields slowly accumulated, making it harder for Sophie to reach the elf with raw speed, but Sophie had tricks of her own as well. Her Cloud Step power allowed her to run on air as if it were solid ground and, for brief moments, take on a mist form that made her near-impervious to most forms of damage. Her Mirage Step power allowed her to make short, blinking teleports, leaving behind afterimages that sent out dimensional blade attacks to alleviate the pressure.

Sophie also used a space-distorting power. She could manipulate space to dodge seemingly unavoidable attacks, but where Jason also used his power to obscure and deceive, Sophie incorporated the distortions into her ever-flowing movement. Adding staccato shifts to her prodigious speed made it all the harder to predict and intercept her, while incongruously never seeming erratic or disjointed.

Jason had joined the Storm King, Soramir, Trenchant Moore and Liara in a viewing booth, at Soramir's request. The king had already levied some pointed questions about how Jason was communing with his cloud house through the palace's defence magic, but to Jason's surprise, Soramir had shut him down.

"That space-distortion ability she's using," Soramir said as she observed Sophie. "That's Between the Raindrops?"

"Good eye," Jason said.

"Her mastery of it is formidable. In fact, her entire power set is dangerously skill-oriented, yet she makes it look easy. You found this girl stealing in some provincial city-state?"

"There was an open contract to catch her," Jason said. "Oddly enough, we'd met before, briefly. Friend of a friend. Once it became obvious that there was some ugly politics involved, turning her into an adventurer seemed the obvious way to get it settled."

Liara let out a snorting laugh, despite the august company.

"You're the only person who thinks it's obvious to break the thief you caught yourself out of an Adventure Society holding facility, stash her with Emir Bahadir, of all people, and then turn her into an adventurer."

"Bahadir?" the king asked with a scowl.

"He's a friend," Jason said. "I know he's not super-popular around here."

"She's quite the find," Soramir said. "I'm starting to see why Roland has always been so avid about scholarships."

"You're talking about Roland Remore?" Jason asked, referring to Rufus' diamond-rank grandfather.

"Yes. His family runs a school. He won't stop talking about it."

“Try turning it into a drinking game,” Jason suggested. “It won’t stop him, but it makes it a lot more fun.”

As they talked, the duel below was escalating. Sophie blurred as the Eternal Moment power accelerated her personal time stream. She used the brief moment of subjectively frozen time to create a storm of wind blades that erupted when time resumed. Each blade exploded on impact, smashing many of the conjured weapons apart. It brought her precious breathing room after they had threatened to overwhelm her.

“This match is shaping up to be quite interesting,” Soramir said. “Miss Wexler is getting stronger as she goes, and I believe she’s inflicting escalating retributive damage. Is that something from her balance essence?”

“That’s right,” Jason said. “She used an awakening stone of karma to pick up that particular power. Legendary stone, but it didn’t disappoint. Her opponent is interesting, though. It seems like she’s being increasingly pushed, but it looks like she’s using all those conjured swords and shields to set up a combat ritual. Something to flip the match in a moment, I suspect.”

“You noticed that?” Soramir asked, mild surprise in his voice.

“A member of his team uses combat rituals quite heavily, Ancestral Majesty,” Liara explained. “It is quite likely that Miss Wexler has likewise recognised it.”

“Yet, she hasn’t started taking greater risks to try and close the fight out early,” Soramir observed. “She should be racing to finish the battle before her opponent completes the ritual, even at the risk of taking greater damage. Yet she maintains her slowly escalating tempo.”

“For all her speed,” Jason said, “Sophie does things at her own pace.”

“Meaning she either doesn’t know about the ritual, or she has something ready herself,” Soramir observed.

“Sophie used a couple of awakening stones of the moment,” Jason said. “One of them gave her that self-accelerating power she used to produce all those wind blades at once. The other gave her a power she hasn’t shown off yet.”

Soramir tapped a finger to his lips thoughtfully, considering the powers such a stone could produce from Sophie’s essences. It was a long list, even off the top of his head, but the circumstances gave him clues as to what it could be. His eyes sparkled as he made a guess.

“Moment of Oneness?” he asked.

“You know your essence abilities,” Jason said.

“It will take courage and timing to pull off,” Soramir observed.

"I'm not worried," Jason said. "Courage and timing are kind of her things."

The combat ritual suddenly triggered and the arena was immediately filled with so many conjured swords it was impossible to see the combatants with the naked eye.

"Fog of Swords," Soramir said. "Dedicated combat ritual essence ability spells are extremely rare."

"Levelling that thing must be a real prick," Jason said. "The effort shows, though; she timed it well. Sophie's time-acceleration power could maybe have let her dodge it all, but her enemy made sure it was on cooldown."

The swords plunged in, too thick and too numerous for any amount of spatial distortion to let Sophie avoid. Countless swords slammed into her, each one exploding as it did. They moved with blinding speed, designed specifically to catch out even someone as fast as Sophie. In the wake of the force explosions that distorted the air, Sophie was left standing unharmed, not having bothered to dodge. Her opponent's eyes went wide as Sophie blinked, arriving right behind her. Sophie's fist was a blur as it arrived at the back of the elf's head, only to be stopped dead as it was caught in a hand. The impact caused their clothes and hair to whip as if caught in a gale.

Up in the booth, Jason looked down at Soramir, blocking Sophie's punch, then to the diamond ranker's now-empty seat.

"Miss Wexler," Soramir said. "Unless Young Mistress Draglund here objects, I am going to declare you the victor."

The elf was shaken, both from the sudden arrival of Soramir Rimaros and the blast that had gone off right behind her head.

"No objection, Ancestral Majesty."

"Excellent," Soramir said. "It was a fine match indeed. I can honestly say that you are as excellent a pair of warriors as is to be found at your rank."

The elf bowed.

"Thank you for your kind words, Ancestral Majesty. This is the honour of my life."

"You are a credit to your house, Mistress Draglund. Have you ever considered switching over to the Sapphire Crown guild?"

"I am very satisfied where I am, Ancestral Majesty."

"Well, you can't blame an old man for trying," he said, then turned to Sophie.

"I won't bother trying to recruit you," he told her. "I imagine you're at least as much trouble as your friend Asano."

"I do my best."

"From what I've just seen," Soramir told her, "your best is very good indeed."

Chapter 613

Uncharacteristic Sincerity

Melody woke up in a small pond, her head pounding. She opened her eyes and saw massive amounts of destruction above her, something having ravaged the inside of Asano's cloud building. It had destroyed the room she was in and dumped her all the way down into the mostly intact atrium.

She was in the waterfall pond that was the atrium's centrepiece, but the damage meant the waterfall no longer fell into it. As she got to her feet, dripping wet, she saw the water was currently spilling from a hole in the lowest mezzanine level.

Melody had only briefly been in the atrium, accompanying her daughter as they talked in spaces more pleasant than her cell. Her accommodations were far from uncomfortable, but there was something about open space and natural light that even the plushiest of beds couldn't make up for. She looked around, her eyes lingering on the transparent wall that showed a wide expanse of sky. Her gaze then drifted down, to the doors.

"That would be a less than ideal decision, Ms Jain," a prim voice said. One of Asano's shadow minions emerged from her shadow.

"Looks like your employer is having a rough day," Melody told Shade.

"This is hardly a rough day for Mr Asano," Shade told her. "The day you met him was a rough day. Not in his top five, but perhaps top ten."

"He almost died that day."

"Yes," Shade said. "Almost. Now, if you'll follow me please?"

"What's going on in here?" she asked as she followed the shadow man.

"Some gold rankers broke in and detonated some manner of device."

"Where are they now?"

Rather than Shade, she was answered by pained screams coming from above.

"Oh dear," Soramir said as Rufus' opponent entered the arena from the large doors at the end.

"What is it?" the Storm King asked.

"If I'm not mistaken, that young man is using the classic sword master combination of sword, swift, adept and master."

"Ah," the king said.

Jason noticed that Liara looked confused.

“It’s the combination used by arguably the world’s greatest swordsman,” Jason explained.

“What’s the issue with that?” Liara asked.

“This fellow is about to duel with that swordsman’s grandson.”

“Oh, dear.”

Different magical abilities led to different physiques amongst adventurers, although they showed in different ways. There was something of a default, which was the lean athleticism of a track and field champion. The variations came from those whose powers gave them physical prowess above their baseline attributes, and they didn’t always present in the same way.

Gary, Farrah and Neil all had comparable levels of strength, yet each looked different. Gary was built like a furry powerlifter, while Neil was more like a bodybuilder who didn’t know how to dress himself properly. Farrah’s physique was bulked out more than the average essence user while remaining lean enough that she could hide it under the right clothes. She was nowhere near the bodybuilder physique that Neil sported.

Essence users more focused on speed maintained a healthy athleticism, but trended more sleek and lithe. Sophie’s lissom body was somewhere between a nymph and a knife, and the swordsman facing off against Rufus had a similar feel. His clothes and physique were both light, and while the sword at his waist was a sabre, his body felt as sharp and pointed as a rapier.

Rufus had the standard physique for an essence user, which still made him look like an Olympic decathlete. Like his opponent, he wore light armour, but with stiffer panels over areas that could afford less flexibility. The magical materials still provided the mobility to make full use of his speed and silver-rank attributes, but forewent the absolute freedom of movement that more acrobatic power sets required.

The pale grey tones of Rufus’ armour contrasted his midnight skin and the sword he conjured into his hand. It was a golden scimitar with ornate red scrollwork etched into the blade. He held it down by his side where the air around it combusted into golden flames that flared for a moment before settling to wreath the blade.

“I wonder if he’s ever set his pants on fire doing that?” Jason wondered, observing from the royal viewing booth. It was rather like an owner’s box at a sports stadium, with a mix of standing room, seating and a loaded buffet table. “I bet he has. What’s this other guy’s name?”

“Glenn Twenhey,” Liara said.

“Glen 20?” Jason asked. “Where I come from, that’s stuff you spray after taking a poo.”

The royalty surrounding him all looked in his direction.

“What?” Jason asked. “There are fewer essence users where I come from, so toilets are a much bigger deal. Unlike you lot, even rich people need to be aware of poo-related infrastructure.”

“Jason,” Liara hissed. “Stop saying ‘poo’ in front of the king.”

“Why? Does he have a weird fetish or something? Your Majesty, I’m just assuming you have a good crystal wash supplier.”

“Perhaps, Mr Asano,” Soramir said, “You could focus on the duel before us.”

“They’re still just staring at each other like anime characters.”

“Then how about to stop talking about poo, shut your damn mouth and show a modicum of respect while you wait quietly?” Liara asked. This drew all the gazes to her, but Jason quietly moved to the front of the booth, standing next to Liara as he looked out. He activated a small privacy screen to incorporate just the two of them.

“Is that better?” he asked lightly.

“You are not helping my standing in the royal family, Asano. You’re a bad influence.”

“Yet, here you are, alongside the king and his great, great whatever grandad.”

“Stern Jason, remember?”

“Yeah, I gave up on that. Stern Jason is for murdering people, so you really shouldn't ask for him. Also, he's kind of a prick, although regular Jason is talking in third person, so there's pros and cons either way, I guess.”

“Why are you always like this?”

“Why do people participating in oppressive systems of governance always act like being too casual is some grave transgression?”

“Oh, just shut up.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

Liara glared at him.

“You and Baseph,” he asked. “Is that an open relationship thing?”

“Asano, I was an Adventure Society investigator for longer than you have been alive, so when I tell you that I will hide your corpse where magic won't find it, you would do very well to believe me.”

Like Rufus, his opponent was human. Glenn was leaning forward, almost like a sprinter on a block. He and Rufus stared at one another in a silence that extended for an entire minute, then a second and a third, neither moving so much as a tremble. Then a voice resonated through the area.

“...just touch this crystal, right?” Jason’s voice boomed.

“Get away from that,” Liara’s voice followed.

“They’re just standing there! Get on with it Rufus, you dill pickle! I don’t have all—”

Jason’s voice was cut off, but the audience and Rufus’ opponent were all looking in the direction of the royal viewing booth. Stewards were escorting Jason out, with an angry-looking princess trailing behind.

“That’s the man everyone’s been talking about?” Glenn asked Rufus.

“Yeah,” Rufus said with a grin. “It’s good to have him back.”

“...defeated the entire point of the exercise and ruined my reputation while you were at it,” Liara railed as she led Jason into the booth where his companions were.

“I said it wouldn’t work,” Neil said, turning at their entrance along with the rest of Jason’s friends. “I kept saying it, but did anyone listen to me? No, they did not. We should have just snuck off in the night.”

“He’s not wrong,” Farrah said.

“Not wrong?” Neil asked. “Can’t you just say that I’m right?”

“It feels like that would set a bad precedent,” Farrah told him.

“Did they start fighting yet?” Jason asked, looking out the glass viewing wall.

“No,” Farrah said. “And what have you been doing to Liara?”

“How he treats me is secondary to how he keeps disrespecting the royal family.”

“I’m not feeling like it’s a positive relationship from their end, either,” Jason said.

“Do you have no respect for the concept of royalty at all?” Liara asked.

“Nope.”

“No.”

“He does not.”

“Not even a little.”

“I’m a republican, bro.”

“You’re a Republican?” Travis asked Taika incredulously.

“Australian republican,” Taika explained. “It means I want to stop using someone else’s Queen as a loaner.”

“What they said,” Jason agreed. “Didn’t you read my file front to back? I should have been in there.”

“It mentioned problems with authority,” Liara said. “Not some kind of anti-monarchical bent.”

“That’s about as significant an understatement as I’ve ever heard,” Farrah said.

“Gods and great astral beings make him their personal enemy,” Humphrey pointed out. “What does he have to do, hire a town crier?”

“I respect people one at a time, Liara,” Jason said. “I respect you. But if your family had left me alone, I’d be in my house that hadn’t been blown up right now and wouldn’t give your family a second thought.”

“Asano, this isn’t just some game.”

“Yes, Liara,” he said the amusement in his voice turned to weariness. “It is.”

“We’re talking about one of the most prominent kingdoms in the world,” Liara said.

“Yes,” Farrah agreed. “And while your aristocracy was fighting over scraps of influence, Jason was fighting to save his world and blunt the invader coming for this one. What is one kingdom to him?”

Liara sighed, her shoulders slumping.

“Asano, would it really hurt you to keep your mouth shut and do what you’re told for one damn night?”

“Yes,” Arabelle said, turning from where she had been sitting quietly, watching her son in the arena below. “Yes, it would. Tell the good princess why, Gareth.”

“From the moment he was pulled into this world,” Gary said, “Jason has been told to bow to power. If he ever did, he’d be dead, I’d be dead and most of the people I love would be dead. If you ever see Jason bow, Princess, you should start running because he’s probably about to kill everyone. And I think we all know by now that only being silver rank won’t stop him.”

“I’ve seen him do it,” Taika added. “The killing everyone part, not the bowing. He’s done it on TV.”

“That’s like a recording crystal that everyone in the world can watch,” Farrah explained. “And everyone did watch.”

“He’s super famous in my world,” Taika said. “Controversial, sure, but famous.”

“You asked for a certain version of Jason,” Arabelle said, “as if he were a different person. But he’s not. That part of him that is holding those men in his cloud house right now is a part of him, the way that Liara Rimaros and Princess Liara are parts of you,

different, yet part of a whole. Which is why Princess Liara is unhappy about how this is going, while Liara Rimaros recognises that Jason would have been a lot better off if you and your family had left him alone. Perhaps you should do that now, and let cooler heads prevail so we can talk this through later.”

“That... is sound advice,” Liara acknowledged. “I will find you at your pagoda after this is all done, Asano. I want to see who these people are coming after you.”

Jason nodded his acknowledgement and she left.

“Thank you,” Jason said, his voice breaking up a little. “I’d almost forgotten what it felt like to have people stand up for you.”

“Just to be clear, I didn’t,” Neil said from the buffet table. “I think you should have kept quiet and went along for once.”

“Weren’t you the guy who’s been saying this wouldn’t work the whole time?” Travis asked him.

“Someone on this team has to be the sensible one. That’s why I let everyone know that I was going to be right – which I was – and then accepted the reality and made the most of this buffet.”

“I’m surprised they got it set up so quick,” Jason said. “Those palace stewards don’t muck about.”

“They are very admirable,” Shade agreed from Jason’s shadow.

“I suppose the rush is why there isn’t much food, compared to the tables in the ballroom.”

“Oh, there was plenty,” Farrah said, looking at Gary.

Jason let out a sigh.

“If you’d all permit me a moment of uncharacteristic sincerity, I’d like to thank you. On Earth, it was me and Farrah against the world, more often than not, and I barely made it through intact. I’m still not completely sure I did. We were both on the ragged edge.”

“You more than me,” Farrah clarified and Jason laughed.

“Yes, me more than you. I forgot what it was to have a whole family who would stand up for you against anyone, whatever the circumstances. I guess I’m trying to thank you all for reminding me of that tonight.”

Gary moved away from the food table to embrace Jason in a bone-crushing hug.

“Oh, hey,” Clive said. “Rufus finally started fighting.”

“Oh, the duel,” Taika said. “I totally forgot why we were here.”

Chapter 614

The Only Wound You Can Truly Suffer

Jason's commandeering of the arena's public address system had broken the tension between Rufus and his opponent, Glenn Twenhey. After they saw Jason escorted off, however, they went right back to staring at one another. It was more than just assessing the other by physique, clothing and body language. Their auras were clashing like fencers, each seeking an opening that would make for an advantage as the fight began, or even uncovered a little extra information that could be the difference between victory and defeat.

"I should have moved when your friend provided the distraction," Glenn said.

"Wouldn't have helped," Rufus said. "And I'm sorry for what's about to happen. But you knew who my grandfather was when you picked me as an opponent, did you not?"

"I did. Hector tried to talk me out of it, but I insisted."

Rufus nodded.

"I know that feeling," Rufus said. "The need to prove yourself, only to be dismantled by an opponent you underestimated."

"Who says I'm underestimating you?"

Instead of answering, Rufus used his speed accelerating power and everything seemed to freeze as his subjective time stream outpaced the world around him. He used that time to close the distance between them, leaving a trail of light behind him. Time unfroze and he smashed Glenn with a head butt, having never raised his golden sword. Glenn realised that Rufus had burned a long cooldown power to effectively just flex, as a head butt was nothing to a silver ranker. The simple surprise of it had staggered him more than the damage.

Glenn activated his own time accelerating power, but he didn't need it to close the gap, since Rufus had done it for him. Rufus seemed to freeze, standing with his silver sword at his side, and Glenn used a trick just like Sophie's. Attacks made during the accelerated time-stream would be all but harmless, so he generated a large number of blade wave projectiles which were ready to launch as soon as normal time resumed. It was only as the acceleration was about to end that he noticed a problem.

"Wait, *silver* sword?"

Rufus had the eclipse confluence essence. It informed the way he fought both with specific powers, like the gold and silver swords he could conjure, along with the general theme of his combat style. He shifted between three combat modes based on the sun, the moon and the eclipse. The sun state was built around speed and offensive ability, while

the moon was about elusiveness and stealth. The eclipse state offered powerful but short-term buffs or powerful finishers.

Each state was a combination of how he fought, the way he moved and the powers he used, some of which offered different advantages, depending on which state he was in.

His *Light of the Sun, Shadow of the Moon* ability was one of several that offered different effects based on his current state. In the moon state, it could make him intangible for a brief moment. When Glenn's mass of blade waves shot into Rufus, they passed right through him. The intangibility only lasted a few seconds, but Rufus triggered it right before Glenn had slowed time, guaranteeing it would be up when Glenn's ability ended and his attack launched.

"That was nicely done," the Storm King observed. "Luck?"

"Hardly," Soramir said. "The swift essence is a favourite amongst skill-focused melee adventurers. Personal time-acceleration powers are very common, even when not hunting for them with specific awakening stones. Even magic swordsmen who go for other essences get them. The Remore boy gets his from the light essence."

"And I get mine from lightning," the king said. "You're saying that Remore predicted both that his enemy would have that ability, and that he would use it in that moment."

"Yes."

"Then it was luck. He could have easily been wrong."

"Yes, but his odds were not as bad as they seem. This is a battle for reputation. By burning one of his most powerful abilities to make an attack that was nothing more than a statement, Remore was baiting his opponent. It began when they spoke before they fought. Then Remore disregarded Twenhey with his opening move. He was essentially telling his opponent that he could throw away key abilities and still win."

"I see," the king said with a nod. "Twenhey wanted to show up Remore by using the same ability to show him – and all of us – that he deserved to be taken seriously. Especially by the grandson of the man who stands as the pinnacle of Twenhey's essence combination."

"Exactly," Soramir said. "Instead, he was outplayed again, which appears to have set a tone."

Glenn was a human and his ability set was reflective of that. His power set was very high on offensive abilities, particularly special attacks. This fit very nicely into the Rimaros adventurer ethos of ultra-specialisation, as he was a pure striker. Having so many

aggressive options at his disposal meant that he could tailor the approach of his offence to the enemy he was facing. If one approach didn't work, he could pivot to another. What he had never previously encountered was a situation where none of his approaches worked.

The advantage of using one of the most common and well-researched essence combinations on the planet was that it was easy to optimise. Strategies to develop more specific power sets and synergies were more readily available. Tailoring a power set was never a perfectly reliable endeavour, but with a common combination made up of common-rarity essences, it was more reliable than most.

The disadvantage of this approach was that it had the weaknesses of its strengths. An opponent who was familiar with these strategies and techniques would, sight unseen, have a solid grasp of at least the general approaches such an essence user would take.

Rufus talked a lot about how his family ran a school, but Jason had never understood the totality of what that meant, or why it was such a source of pride. The Remore Academy studied adventurer methodology from across the globe. This helped them to educate students that came from around the world, as well as prepare their students for what they would encounter in their travels.

Remore academy students were scions of international mercantile guilds, famous adventuring families, aristocrats and even royalty. The academy prided itself on preparing those students for whatever they might face. That could be a tricky diplomatic situation in a palace, a grim assassination attempt on a remote roadway or a pitched battle against sky pirates.

Rufus was more than just the beneficiary of the teachings of his family's academy. He had seen all kinds of adventurers from when he was old enough to be carried around by his father. Most importantly for his current situation was that Rufus had been trained in swordsmanship personally by the greatest swordsman in the world.

Glenn was exceptionally skilled. His proficiency was not just with sword technique and his essence abilities, but using them in conjunction for results greater than either would achieve alone. His efficiency was tight and his tactics were built on centuries of refinement, passed down by the masters of history. It wasn't enough. Every tactic Glenn used, every ability he pulled out, was not just something that Rufus had seen, but also practised against extensively. Rufus knew the methods of sword masters and he knew how to counter them.

Glenn was very good and deserving of his place in a prestigious guild, but the more they clashed, the less Rufus saw him as an opponent. Glenn, in Rufus' eyes, increasingly

became a collection of flaws in need of correction. Since his family ran a school Rufus did what he knew: he put on a class.

Using his sun state, Rufus applied pressure on Glenn, baiting out techniques and provoking counters that he dismantled one by one. When Glenn shot blade waves that tracked their opponent, Rufus shifted to a moon state where he couldn't be tracked. The blades shot forward blindly, hitting walls or the floor. When Glenn incorporated special attacks into his swordsmanship, Rufus spotted the indicators and dodged, blocked or countered as appropriate.

Glenn grew increasingly frustrated as his tactics were pulled apart in front of the high society of Rimaros. Guild masters and the heads of noble houses were watching as Rufus disassembled his abilities like a watchmaker taking apart a faulty timepiece. He was on the greatest stage in his life, only for every aspect of his prowess as an adventurer to be pulled out and found wanting.

As a final, desperate stratagem, Glenn drew back from Rufus and paused.

"Would you be willing to try something a little different?" Glenn asked.

"I've been waiting for something even a little different this entire fight," Rufus told him.

Glenn sheathed his sword, untied the dimensional pouch bound tightly to his potion belt to avoid it flapping around, and pulled out two collars. They were comfortably padded, but still plainly suppression collars.

"Pure swordsmanship," Glenn said. "No powers. How good you are against how good I am."

Rufus blinked in surprise.

"I will say this," he said. "That is the first time since we walked out here that you've done something that I truly did not anticipate."

Rufus held out his hand and Glenn tossed him a collar. Rufus opened his own dimensional pouch and took out a sword, since he would be unable to use his conjured ones. It was a scimitar, but very plain compared to those he could create through magic.

"If you want something better, I can loan you one."

"This sword was crafted especially for me with care, by my best friend in the world. You don't have anything better."

"Friendship is all well and good, Mr Remore, but you shouldn't let it blind you to the fact that your friend is a worthless smith."

Rufus smiled.

"My grandfather has given me all manner of good advice over the course of my life," he said. "For example, he once told me that if someone provokes you, then let them. But

instead of getting angry and letting it cloud your judgement, let it take away your mercy as you calmly take them apart. I was only going to take this so far, Young Master Twenhey, but now I find myself short on mercy.”

Glenn smiled back as he clipped on his suppression collar and Rufus did the same.

“Just so you know, Mr Remore, my sword instructor studied at your academy. He was trained personally by your grandfather and spent decades developing counters to his fighting style.”

“Would that be Ayer Wick you're referring to?” Rufus asked, eliciting a surprised expression from Glenn.

“You know of him?”

“It was a guess. A lot of people develop counters to my grandfather's style, and Wick is about right in terms of age and location. My grandfather rather enjoys that they do, since it's hard to refine his style as the centuries roll on. He showed me the counters your sword instructor developed. They were okay. I saw you trying them in our earlier clashes, which was why I was so surprised you chose this path.”

“That was with powers mixed in,” Glenn said. “We'll see how you do when all you have is technique.”

“Yes,” Rufus agreed, his eyes glancing over the audience. “I'm going to make a point of it.”

He raised his scimitar.

“With this sword.”

Jason had become very, very good with the sword. Rufus had helped him to take the skill books containing the Way of the Reaper and make the technique his own. After the incredible number of battles Jason had been through, wild and desperate and strange, experience had truly allowed him to become a master of the sword.

Technique to technique, Glenn would have beaten Jason. Jason was an adventurer, not a duellist, and his combat style intricately blended his skills and powers to the point that removing one would severely impede the other. Glenn's strategy of removing powers from the equation would have gotten him a win against Jason without question.

Rufus was not Jason. There was a reason that Rufus was seen as the future of the Remore family. They knew talent and had nurtured his, with training and opportunities they carefully engineered so that he would see success and failure both. When he went his own way, Rufus had setbacks.

Although they didn't push their expectations on him, Rufus knew his family anticipated great things. Responsibility weighed heavily on him, and the loss of Farrah and Jason had somewhat derailed him. But the life of an adventurer was long and his family was patient. They did not interfere as he turned to teaching over adventuring. Only his mother stepped in, and even she was a light hand.

The return of Jason and Farrah brought with it a slow change in Rufus. He wasn't sure what his future held, be it teaching or adventuring, both or neither, but he knew one thing: he wasn't letting his friends down again. During his time in Rimaros, Rufus had taken the fundamentals of training he taught Jason and followed them with relentless determination. He honed his skills, pushed his body and took contract after contract, which the monster surge offered in plentiful supply.

The weight of what Rufus had been through was different to what Glenn had done. He was not dissimilar to Rufus if he had never left Vitesse; never felt true desperation and never felt the consequences of abject failure. The pride and ambition that drove him was a gentle breeze before the raging gale of Rufus' determination.

"What's he doing?" Clive asked. "Why doesn't he finish it?"

"I don't know what you call it here, if you have even have the practice in any of this world's cultures," Jason said. "Where I come from, it's usually known as counting coup. You touch the enemy without harming them, to prove that you could have beaten them. It's a way to gather prestige or humiliate an enemy into accepting defeat. Rufus was making a show of how much better he was than this guy, but I think slagging off your sword pushed him over the line, Gary."

"Good," Gary said. "There's nothing wrong with a good, plain, reliable weapon. You don't have to make it all fancy."

Jason glanced down at the scabbard on his hip.

"That one is your fault," Gary said, following Jason's gaze. "Your soul bond made it go weird."

"Making things go weird is kind of my thing," Jason said, prompting agreeing nods all around.

"I yield," a crestfallen Glenn said.

"I haven't even touched you with the edge of my sword," Rufus said. "You're going to quit without a scratch on you?"

"You didn't have to do it this way," Glenn told him.

“You’re not going to fight on? What about the pride of your guild? Of your sword instructor? Of your house? Are you going to throw it all on the ground?”

“Why are you doing this?” Glenn asked, his voice pleading.

“We didn’t ask for this,” Rufus shot back coldly. “I didn’t bring us here. Hector de Varco’s challenge turned us into a whetstone for his house and guild to hone their reputation. Defeating you wouldn’t hurt you. Humiliation is the only wound you can truly suffer. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to go have my sword repaired.”

Rufus held up his blade, peering as he inspected it for nicks and dents.

“Oh. It looks like I don’t have to.”

Jason and his companions were waiting, sitting around calmly as Rufus returned to the viewing box.

“That was awesome,” Travis said. “I know we haven’t known each other very long, but you totally educated that guy. And Jason was telling me your whole family fights like that? You should open a school.”

Rufus frowned in confusion.

“My family does run a school,” he said. “I thought I told you tha...”

He trailed off as Travis took a shot glass from the dimensional bag at his waist. Everyone else in the room but Rufus himself did the same and drained their glasses. Rufus took on an aggrieved expression, his eyes landing on Arabelle and the empty glass in her hand.

“Mum, you too?”

Chapter 615

Mother's Favourite

"Humphrey is the least-suited to duelling out of you four," Neil assessed as they watched Humphrey enter the arena.

Jason had a lot of training and experience in the five years since his first arrival on Pallimustus, allowing him to master his own power set. But when it came to group tactics, Jason could not match the lifelong education people like Neil, Humphrey and Rufus had gone through. That big-picture understanding required exhaustive instruction on essence abilities, roles, tactics and strategy that couldn't be replaced by skill books or combat experience. It took active guidance and tutelage that Jason never had neither the time nor opportunity for. His time training with Rufus, Farrah and Gary had been a desperate rush to cram him with the fundamentals of being an adventurer.

Neil, on the other hand, was one of the handful of adventurers in Greenstone that had enjoyed that kind of training. The Davone and Mercer families had colluded to team him with Thadwick Mercer at a young age, giving Neil the same opportunities afforded to Thadwick and his sister, Cassandra. Neil had made the most of those opportunities, like Cassandra, rather than squandering them, like Thadwick.

As the healer, Neil was always watching over the team in a more holistic manner than any other member. This made his understanding of the team's strategies and tactics as comprehensive as that of Humphrey, who was the driving force in developing them. He was, therefore, fully qualified to assess the chances of his team members in different circumstances.

"Humphrey has set himself up to be very team-oriented," Neil explained to the people in the viewing box that weren't on their team. "He's developed his combat style, his tactics and his equipment around working with the group. Belinda's cooldown reductions, my buffs, Clive's mana replenishment; many of our core tactics centre on supporting Humphrey, while he has increasingly focused on making the most of those advantages. Not to say he isn't strong alone, but he has given up an amount of solitary strength to be the solid anchor of our team."

"He's the black lion," Jason said.

"A black lion?" Neil asked. He and the rest of the team were confused and would have ignored Jason like usual, if not for Taika and Travis nodding in agreement.

"That makes sense, bro."

"You're saying that he's strong on his own," Travis said, "but he's no Voltron."

"That's it," Neil said. "No more people from Earth, or this will turn into a disaster."

"I think the problem," Belinda said, "is that Humphrey isn't selfish enough. He's not a glory hound, unlike some other team members participating in these duels."

"Hey," Jason complained.

"Oh, please," Farrah said. "Your first idea on how to investigate magic in your world was to pretend to be an angel and faith-heal your way through a children's hospital. Don't even try to pretend you aren't a big, prancing attention seeker."

"And I remember how you were, back in your cage fighting days," Belinda said to Sophie.

"Theatricality is a part of arena fighting," Sophie said. "No one loves a boring gladiator. But I wouldn't go underestimating Humphrey just because he doesn't care for putting on a show."

"She's right," Rufus said. "Jason, your skills have exploded in the handful of years since we met, but you don't understand just how deep Geller family training goes. Humphrey has been training since before his earliest memories. He's an adventurer down to the bones, and the depth of that only comes out when you start pulling away at the layers. When the Geller family train their people to handle the unusual situations, they are just as diligent as with their training for everyday activities. Perhaps even more so. They know it's the edge cases that will get you killed."

"Not to mention that our entire team is built around handling those edge cases," Clive pointed out.

"That's not a coincidence," Rufus said. "Your entire team reeks of Geller family methodology, and that's far from unique. There's a reason people scramble to be on a team with a Geller who went through their Greenstone training program. If Rick Geller announced at this ball he was recruiting a new team member, he'd be mobbed with applicants from the best families in Rimaros.

"And don't forget that the Geller family is crazy rich," Gary pointed out. "He has entire gear sets to recalibrate his strategies. Not as many as Lindy, but a lot. I made some of that gear myself."

Humphrey stood in his conjured armour that looked increasingly like Stash's natural form, compared to the lower-rank version of the power. The scale armour was glorious with iridescent rainbow scales, like a quilt made of opals. Five blue crystals floated around him, lit up with internal light as they replenished his mana. He had yet to call up either of the swords he could conjure.

“Humphrey Geller,” he introduced himself. His opponent was dressed in strange clothes with numerous folds that looked awkward to fight in.

“They call me The Smoke Hunter.”

“Okay,” Humphrey said, unfazed. He was getting a vibe of early Jason from the alchemist’s sense of melodrama. “You hunt smoke? I didn’t realise it was that hard to find.”

“That’s not what it means.”

“Some people use smoke as signals. Because of how easy it is to see from far away. In fact, most people avoid using smoke when they’re being hunted, specifically because of how easy that would make it to track them down.”

Humphrey was not big on banter. He liked fighting monsters, not people, but his mother had still drilled into him the advantages of making an opponent emotional. So, now that he found himself in a duel, he did his best Jason impression.

“Let’s see what you think of my smoke when you’re choking on it!”

He plucked a syringe from the air and jabbed it into his leg. His body immediately started changing and Humphrey understood what he was up against. His body was growing, the purpose of his unusual clothes revealed as they expanded to accommodate his growth. Folds unfurled and straps slipped through buckles as the loose, bunched-up outfit became fitted light armour. He became twice as tall and half again as wide as he had been moments before.

Humphrey’s opponent was an alchemist, although a very different one from Belinda’s boyfriend, Jory. This was a full-blown combat craftsman who sought to beat Humphrey at his own game of burst-damage in the high-damage, low-endurance mould.

Combat alchemists were unusual, especially non-support variants that engaged in direct combat, so it was unusual to see one in a duel. Humphrey, by contrast, was the most orthodox member on his team, with only Neil coming anywhere close. This meant that Humphrey’s power set, like that of Rufus’ opponent, didn’t pack a lot of surprises in his toolbox. He did have a few, though, and he would need to use them well. Otherwise, predictability would be as much a defining factor in this duel as it had been in the previous.

The alchemist’s proportions became less human and more hunched over. His hands grew bigger and his arms longer. His skin became leathery, taking on the lumpen green of crocodile hide. Reinforced patches on his armour looked strikingly similar to his new skin. He did not look awkward for the transformation, however. Humphrey assessed that he was still limber for his size, like an animal ready to pounce.

Alchemy-fuelled transformation was a rare speciality, but also a famous one. It stood out from all the warrior, wizard and assassin variants, and made for popular villains in

stories. It was centred on powers that required alchemical catalysts to produce extreme transformations, with the nature and potency of the catalyst defining the result. Humphrey had no doubt that his opponent had gone for maximum power at the cost of maximum side-effects in the aftermath.

The alchemist had bet everything on a short-lived burst of power, which was pure Rimaros-style ultra-specialisation. It was a fantastic choice in a duel, or as a trump card for a team large enough to not miss their absence during downtime.

Contrasting the Rimaros approach was Humphrey, who was a dedicated and practical adventurer. His Vitesse-style training was focused around covering all his bases, so as not to be caught out. It worked much better in the versatile tactics his team favoured than Rimaros teams that liked to build around supporting a single specialist.

While Humphrey's team could use a similar approach, usually focused on Humphrey himself, they would never match up to the Rimaros standard in that regard. In that way, they were like Jory compared to this alchemist, in that it was something they could do, but not as well as those who truly focused on it. Humphrey's duel was a microcosm of the Rimaros versus Vitesse styles of adventuring, and his opponent held the advantage.

Humphrey's approach served him well in day-to-day adventuring, which was what he cared about. In the artificial circumstance of a duel, however, it placed him at a disadvantage. He didn't have to think about secondary enemies that might be lurking nearby. He didn't have to worry about watching out for his team or reserving anything for later fights. All the time and resources he had spent on training and equipping himself for those things were useless to him here.

Combat mutagens, especially the powerful ones, were known for two things: their immense potency and their immense backlash when they ran their course. The strategy to combat them was to retreat when the alchemist was at their strongest, wait out the mutagen and strike again when they were at their weakest. But in a duel, there was no retreat. There was nowhere in the arena to hide, and no extra enemies or later fights the alchemist needed to reserve himself for. He could throw everything he had into one challenge, knowing that his opponent had to take it up.

Humphrey was aware that his opponent's enhanced body would have formidable power, resilience and regenerative properties. He had not geared himself up to maximise his offensive strength and he was now grateful for it. That was more Farrah's speciality, and while she might have had the punch to beat the mutagenic monstrosity through all of those enhancements, he did not, even with his most aggressive gear. While his attacks were powerful, they weren't lava cannon powerful.

Instead, Humphrey had selected to forgo enhancing his attack. His attacks were quite strong on their own, so he focused on defence and endurance. Hidden under his conjured armour were amulets that enhanced the resilience of his conjured objects, be they his swords, armour or wings. Enchanted armbands, rings, anklets and others all offered simple and passive, but effective boosts to his mana recovery, stamina and certain essence abilities.

Seeing his opponent hulk out in front of him, Humphrey knew that he had made the right choice. His path to victory was holding long enough that the power of his opponent petered out. Once the mutagenic cocktail the alchemist had taken lost its effectiveness, the backlash would leave Humphrey the victor, assuming he could last that long.

Humphrey hadn't wasted time as his opponent was transforming. He could have used that moment to launch into an attack and try to end the fight before the alchemist's transition was fully complete. That was an all-or-nothing gamble, however, and one he knew he'd lose. Any adventurer who had reached the level this Smoke Hunter had would have traps prepared for anyone looking to exploit such an obvious weakness.

The moment the alchemist injected himself and Humphrey realised what he was up against, he sprung into action himself. He pulled a gourd from his storage space, spilling bone ash from it in a circle with practised speed. He then tossed a pair of twelve-sided dice into the circle, and illusions projected from their top faces as they came to a stop. Above one die was the image of a fish, while the other showed a very pale, blue swirl.

Humphrey didn't stick around to look at the results, as the alchemical bulk of his transformed opponent was already lunging at him. He dashed to the side, the dice leaping through the air to return to him. He shoved them into his storage space while on the move, skirting away from the circle and around his opponent.

Humphrey's initial assessment of the Smoke Hunter's abilities under the effect of the mutagen proved accurate. The alchemist was not slowed down by his large body, giving Humphrey no advantage in speed. All that silver-rank speed had a lot of mass behind it, however, which was great for ramming an enemy but not for quick changes of direction. This was something Humphrey understood well, having spent years swinging a giant sword where the key was balancing mass and leverage. With every rank, Humphrey had grown stronger and stronger as his sword grew heavier and heavier, so his grasp of weight and momentum was drilled into his most fundamental combat instincts.

This was something Humphrey called on, not to fight, this time, but to evade, as he led the alchemist on a merry chase around the arena. It didn't take long for the alchemist

to realise that Humphrey was buying time, with Humphrey still yet to pull out a weapon. He stopped in the middle of the arena and Humphrey paused, carefully out of reach.

“Coward,” the monster spat in a growling, inhuman voice.

“Fighting the way you want me to would make me a fool, not a coward.”

If his opponent was willing to waste time, Humphrey would accept that gift with graciousness. He did not share Jason’s love of combat banter, but his mother would growl at him if he didn’t use every tool available. In a demonstration of Geller indoctrination that Rufus was not familiar with, it never occurred to Humphrey that his mother might not know what he was up to at any given moment.

Sadly, the alchemist gave up on talk when his provocation failed and plucked two orbs from a dimensional storage space, each large enough to fill his giant hands. One he threw in a flat trajectory, high above Humphrey’s head. Humphrey didn’t know what the alchemist was up to and dodged so that it didn’t pass directly over him. The other orb was tossed over the alchemist’s shoulder.

Each orb was a sphere swirling with mist, both of which smashed against the large doors at each end of the arena. The strength of the monstrous alchemist was enough that even a casual toss let them cross the distance. Thick smoke started filling the arena from each broken orb, slowly expanding towards the combatants in the middle.

“What will you do when you’re out of room to run away?” the alchemist taunted.

“Well,” Humphrey said, “the first thing I’ll do is realise that your transformation had drawbacks to go with its advantages. It’s heavy, and apparently, your aura senses aren’t great. I’m not sure if it also affects your intelligence or if you’re just naturally dim, but either way, you haven’t realised that the way I was leading you around was specifically so you wouldn’t look back at the circle I left behind.”

The alchemist turned around to see that the circle of bone powder had turned into a pale circle of light from which strange creatures were now emerging, one by one. Rising silently into the air was what looked like air elementals, being made of condensed air that was hard to spot but created a visible distortion. Easier to see where the skeletons inside them, which were like that of a shark except for being somewhat draconic in shape, mostly in the skull. The wind dragon sharks were also wearing ethereal armour, easier to spot than their airy bodies but still not as obvious as their floating skeletons.

Humphrey’s summoning ability, Spartoi, called up dragon bone warriors, but his summoner’s dice replaced the ordinary soldiers with more exotic forms. One die changed their shape, while the other infused them with elemental or even more exotic energies. The results were rather random, but added some much-needed unpredictability to Humphrey’s

orthodox combat style. The summons were then further bolstered by Humphrey's power to equipped them with conjured magical gear.

A dozen of the wind dragon sharks were already floating silently in the air, gathering above and behind the Smoke Hunter as he focused on chasing Humphrey. Knowing that more extreme mutagenic shifts almost always traded off various things for greater power, and aura sensitivity was a common one, Humphrey had tried to distract his opponent as his summons emerged. To his great satisfaction, it worked, clawing back at least a little of the alchemist's advantage.

With an angry growl, the alchemist resumed his chase, moving the duel into a second phase. This time, Humphrey had much less room to move as the sickly green smoke filled more and more of the arena. He had new advantages, though, as what eventually became twenty wind sharks started harassing his opponent. They weren't a danger to the Smoke Hunter, but they were a frustrating annoyance. The flying creatures clamped onto his limbs, forcing him to smash them off or ram into the walls to crush them, whittling down their number.

Unfortunately for the sharks, their ethereal armour offered little protection against brute force attacks. Unfortunately for the alchemist, destroying that armour inflicted an affliction that left chaotic winds clinging to him and buffeting his body. The affliction was too weak to impede his monstrous strength at first, but the effect grew stronger with each destroyed wind shark, disrupting his movement, coordination and balance. Even so, the alchemist continued destroying them, as it was easier for his strength to power through some wind than deal with sharks hanging off his arms and legs.

Although he was rapidly destroying the sharks, the alchemist was aware that too much time was slipping away. He chose not to completely dedicate himself to eliminating the summons and continued to charge after Humphrey, sharks still swimming through the air to harass him.

Humphrey tried to remain evasive and stretch out the battle further, but his free space was ever-diminishing. He finally pulled out his massive dragon sword, which wreathed itself in fire, adding defensive strikes to his dodging.

Although strength was one of the defining traits of Humphrey's power set, being on the defensive against a larger, stronger opponent was not a novel circumstance. While he was usually the adventurer with the biggest stick, most silver-rank monsters towered over him. The Smoke Hunter was more monster than adventurer at that moment, and Humphrey fought accordingly.

Humphrey's strength might not equal the absurd levels that the alchemist currently possessed, but it was still well above the silver rank baseline. Added to his array of special attacks, the Smoke Hunter was startled at the power behind them, becoming more wary. The long arms and huge hands reaching for Humphrey were blasted away by Humphrey's sword, even as Humphrey continued to dodge. One strike carved off three of the alchemist's fingers, eliciting a howl, even if they quickly grew back.

Despite the impedance of the sharks, it was increasingly difficult for Humphrey to stay out of the alchemist's grasp as the green smoke further boxed him in. That did not mean that his small box of tricks had been emptied out, however. As he was about to get pinned against the wall, he teleported behind his opponent and a mass of spider webbing slammed into the alchemist's back, pinning him against the wall instead. The massive spider that spat it then turned back into a tiny bird and flittered away, vanishing amongst the remaining sharks.

Humphrey didn't bother to attack the entangled alchemist. He was holding a massive sword but his true weapon was time, and cutting the alchemist free himself would be counterproductive. Even so, the Smoke Hunter made relatively short work of the webs, even pinned face-first to the wall. He wrenched his limbs free and leveraged them against the wall, steel-like webbing giving way to prodigious strength. The alchemist, now draped in webbing and the few remaining sharks, turned angrily to face Humphrey. Humphrey opened his mouth, but instead of words, fire came spewing out.

In the viewing room, Arabelle looked at the remnant wind sharks, the shape-shifting dragon, the enemy covered in burning webs and asked a question.

"Didn't you say he was the *most* orthodox member of your team?"

The spider form Stash had taken was called a greater firelight spider. It was known for producing sticky, inflammable webs that clung to its targets, even as they burned. The remnant webs still draped over the Smoke Hunter did exactly that under Humphrey's Fire Breath power, which itself left burning residue behind. Humphrey was under no illusion that it would take out the alchemist, but being covered in what amounted to magic napalm made it rather hard to focus.

As the fight resumed, Stash started participating more following his initial ambush. None of his silver-rank monster forms was a match for the dosed-up alchemist and instead, he used hit-and-run attacks to harass. He shifted from one form to another, too quickly to be pinned down unless the alchemist turned his attention from Humphrey. That

was something the Smoke Hunter could not afford, as while even the burnt-off skin might grow back, every passing moment was a different kind of wound. Each second ticking by brought the duel closer to a victory for Humphrey, and chasing his familiar would just be another distraction.

Humphrey continued to use every trick and tactic available to avoid being pinned down. He conjured his wings to shield him from attacks, de-conjuring them to escape when the alchemist grabbed them. But in the end, he came up short. With almost no space left to avoid the green smoke, he'd already been forced to dip into the billowing wall to avoid the alchemist and felt the poison seeping through his skin. Along with eating away at his flesh, it slowed him just a little, but just a little was enough.

With a shout of triumph, the alchemist's massive hands wrapped around Humphrey, pinning his arms to his sides. He slammed Humphrey with a pair of head butts before hammering him repeatedly into the floor. This continued until the cooldown of Humphrey's teleport allowed him to vanish, but the alchemist was ready.

There was only so much space left for Humphrey to teleport into and the Smoke Hunter predicted Humphrey's destination. He leapt up, even as Humphrey was reappearing above him and conjuring his wings to stay aloft. The alchemist snatched him out of the air. Before even dropping to the floor, the Smoke Hunter threw Humphrey deep into the noxious green gas that now almost filled the arena.

The alchemist grinned at his victory. Even if Humphrey came right out, the smoke would have done enough work to make the result a foregone conclusion. If Humphrey was foolish enough to try and wait out his transformation in the cloud, the poison would finish him off. Before that happened one of the powerful attendees, no doubt monitoring Humphrey's condition, would step in as Soramir had in Sophie's fight.

The alchemist waited, revelling in his triumph. And he waited. And waited. Why wasn't anyone stepping in? He hunted down the last of the sharks as he looked around for Humphrey's elusive familiar, but saw nothing. It had to be somewhere, and maybe it could turn into a monster with invisibility. Or, he realised as his eyes went wide, it could shapeshift into something immune to his smoke's poison.

The alchemist snarled as he pulled an orb from his storage space, immediately throwing it into the smoke. The counteragent dispersed the noxious gas almost as swiftly as a gale, revealing not Humphrey but a giant frog with bright red and green skin.

The frog opened its mouth and Humphrey staggered out, clearly having caught a sharp dose of the smoke before hiding inside the frog. He was also dripping with the frog's

viscous saliva, stumbling with weakness. His skin was marked by the toxin, splotchy with green and black marks.

“Yield,” the alchemist growled.

“I accept your yield,” Humphrey croaked.

“What? No, you yield! You’re about to drop dead!”

Humphrey grinned.

“Would you like to see my mother’s favourite of all my abilities?”

The alchemist had a bad feeling and charged at Humphrey, but the frog sprang into his path. Despite having more mass, the frog bounced away while the alchemist was only brought to a stop, but that was all the time Humphrey needed. Jack Gerling had frustrated Jason with the Immortality power, which cleansed all afflictions unconditionally, ignoring any and all effects that would normally impede or prevent cleansing. It was also one of the most powerful healing abilities in existence, causing Humphrey to glow with golden light as he activated the power. His body was restored to near-full health in an instant, with a potent ongoing recovery effect on top. The cooldown of the power was a full day, but it was Humphrey’s turn to take advantage of their fight being a duel.

The alchemist looked at the restored Humphrey and all the room he now had to evade in with half of the arena cleared of smoke. He could already feel his strength fading and knew that the backlash would soon kick in. That would leave him effectively helpless against a fully recovered opponent.

“I yield.”

Palace stewards came in and cleaned the walls with magic, removing the poison residue left behind by the alchemist smoke. They also used some rituals to repair the damaged portions of the brickwork floor, although it had held up remarkably to the rigours of battle. The observation glass was undamaged, although rather in need of a clean. Once the stewards cleared the area, the doors at each end opened to admit Hector from one end and Jason from the other. The massive doors closed ponderously behind them.

Hector had changed from his formalwear into a formfitting light outfit. The material was a recognisable one, with woven black and blue fabric. Mimicloth was noted for its ability to endure various methods of shape-shifting and matter alteration by its wearer. In the case of Hector, Jason had already been warned of his ability to transform into living stone.

Jason was already in his conjured robes, his sword at his hip. Hector was somewhat taken aback by the strange, portal-like appearance of the cloak draped over him. With the

cloak obscuring his legs and his poised gait, Jason almost seemed to float as he walked towards the centre of the arena. He and Hector both stopped when they were around ten metres apart.

“I feel it’s only right to warn you,” Hector said, “that this arena offers a strong advantage to me. One of my evolved racial gifts allows me to modify my earth abilities with the properties of any nearby magical stone. This arena is built of core-heart lattice granite, which is resilient and easy to repair with the right rituals. Those properties will make my stone abilities much harder to break through, and give me some abilities that will be almost like healing to me.”

Jason said nothing. His aura was invisible to Hector, as was his face in the dark hood. Only his alien eyes were visible to his opponent.

“Well,” Hector said, “if you have nothing to say, I’m going to begin.”

Hector fell over, foaming at the mouth as his body thrashed in a seizure until Soramir’s aura pushed Jason’s back, cutting off the soul attack. Soramir appeared, glaring at Jason.

“That’s quite enough, Mr Asano.”

Jason turned and walked back to the doors, which slowly opened to accept him.