

## 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.