

Chapter 186

I Try to Find the Truth, But That's Your Hiding Place

The city of Jayapura featured a vast mirage chamber complex that was larger and more sophisticated than the Geller family's private chamber. The higher magical density of Jayapura meant that more advanced magical effects could be used and supported. This included potent dimensional magic that allowed the replication of vast spaces, as well as multiple, concurrently-operating chambers in the same complex.

In addition to hiring out spaces for training, it was the premier entertainment space in the city. Essence users would pit themselves against one another or illusionary challenges, all for the entertainment of a paying audience. This produced more than enough funding for the frequent upgrades and regular maintenance required of a top-tier facility.

The organisation that owned and operated the chamber had close ties with the Magic Society, Adventure Society and local government. Important for both the amenities and the revenue it provided the city, the Mirage Chamber Association enjoyed significant power and influence within Jayapura.

Rather than a dome, the mirage chamber was a flat, circular building at the edge of the Mystic Quarter. Very large, it spilled into the adjacent theatre district, which was appropriate enough. Most people came looking for entertainment, rather than to use the facilities for themselves.

"There are whole essence user teams who never become adventurers," Hester explained as they arrived. She had met up with them after they were done at the Magic Society, leading them to the site of their evening's entertainment. They joined the crowd likewise heading in through the large public entrances.

"They make all their money here in the arena, and use monster cores to rank up."

"They can make enough money for that?" Belinda asked.

"They have competition leagues here at the arena," Hester explained. "Teams facing off against one another all year, leading up to the grand championships. There are two leagues a year, in silver, bronze and iron divisions. Obviously, silver is the big draw, with the largest following and the biggest prizes."

"No gold division?" Neil asked.

"Even with the money running through here, getting to gold rank using monster cores is a tough ask," Hester said. "They just don't have the numbers to make a gold division,

which is why the handful of professionals successful enough stop using cores before they hit gold. Being at the peak of silver keeps them at the top of their game.”

“And because they used monster cores to get there,” Jason realised, “they’re well-past their abilities advancing through regular use and training.”

“Exactly,” Hester said. “They keep going until silver-rank longevity is no longer enough, at which point they retire and make their way to gold for the extended life span. This whole place is run by former participants who are all gold rank, now.”

“Is this common practice in big cities?” Jason asked.

“It is,” Humphrey said. “I’ve travelled to a number of large cities and seen the same thing in each.”

“Is it all PvP, or do they mix it up?” Jason asked.

“PvP?” Hester asked.

“Hot adventurer-on-adventurer action,” Jason clarified.

“There are three events, but the big one is the team-against-team arena battles,” Hester said. “They’re fast and exciting, with plenty of powers flying around. There’s also monster hunts, but they aren’t as popular. That tends to bring in competitors who are also active adventurers, but people prefer to see people go up against one another. Lastly is team conflict again, but in larger, more complex environments, with roaming monsters. It’s a slower, more complicated event that doesn’t interest the public as much. It mostly gets attention from the professional adventurer crowd.”

They went inside with the crowd but instead of the large viewing rooms for the general public, a member of the area staff took them upstairs to a private viewing box. It was a large lounge, with a front wall made of dark, impenetrable glass. Luxurious chairs and couches were arrayed in front of it and several low tables were filled with food and drinks.

“Aside from the more comfortable environs,” the staff member explained, “these private rooms differ from the public areas in that you can choose what you want to be looking at any given time. Any event, any division, any match, at your leisure. The projector is controlled from the tablet on the table there, which can also be used to order any food or drink you might want from our comprehensive selection and it will be brought right up.”

“Who do we pay for the snacks?” Neil asked her.

“All costs are included with the room,” the attendant told him.

“Then how are Clive and Belinda going to pay for them?”

“Us?” Belinda asked.

“Clearly you lost the bet,” Neil said.

“No way,” Belinda argued. “‘Mine is the shadow of death’ is way worse than the other chant.”

“You’re clearly wrong. The other one talked about killing gods. Gods!”

“It didn’t mention doing it personally. Don’t forget about that ‘final road to the end of all things’ bit.”

Clive went up to reassure the attendant, who was starting to look a little nervous.

“Don’t worry,” Clive assured her. “They’re just talking about our friend’s new familiars. We’ll be fine here; you can go.”

“Honestly,” Sophie said as she left, “The blood-drinking apocalypse beast is more sinister than either of them. I bet that incantation was the worst of the lot...”

The attendant hurried out, closing the door behind her.

“Am I mistaken,” Neil said, his eyes glued to the viewing screen, “or are these people really good. As in, really, really good.”

“They’re good,” Humphrey confirmed.

They were watching one of the iron-rank monster-hunt events, where teams would take turns hunting identical monsters in identical circumstances and be judged on their performance.

“How do you think we would stack-up against teams like this?” Clive asked.

“Poorly,” Jason said. “These people are at the top of their game in a city with a lot of game to climb over to get there. They’re obviously practised and work effectively together. My guess would be that they’re all closing in on bronze rank.”

“They are,” Hester said. “These are the best Jayapura has to offer and they are, indeed, closing in on bronze rank.”

“We’ll get there,” Humphrey said. “Training and experience, that’s all it is.”

“The only people on our team operating at this level right now,” Jason said, “are Humphrey and Neil. The rest of us have our strengths, but also critical flaws. Clive has been out of the game a long time and his power set is all about judging the circumstances and picking his moments. It’s the kind of thing only experience can improve. The same goes for Belinda but even more so, given she’s been an essence user for about an hour. She isn’t even ready for the Adventure Society field test.”

“We’ll get you there, Lindy,” Sophie assured her friend.

“Yes, we will,” Jason said. “Wexler has skills to match anyone out there but has too many abilities she hasn’t had a chance to get a handle on, yet. The same is true for all of

us, to a degree. As for me, my power set doesn't give me the margin of error Humphrey's or Neil's do, with armour and self-shields. I can be dropped in one hit if I get blind-sided and I've only been in this world half a year. I still have a lot of blind spots where the rest of you would see danger coming."

"So, all those people who went into the astral space with us," Clive said. "They were all this good?"

"No," Hester said. "These people we're watching today have already fulfilled whatever potential they had. When I was selecting people for the Reaper trials, Emir had me looking at unfulfilled potential. These people here are good, but the people who went through the trials have at least the potential to be as good or better."

"And we beat them all," Sophie said with satisfaction.

"That was luck," Jason said. "Sigrid was almost as fast, and she wasn't the only one to jump through that final ring."

"You never told us what you saw, there at the end," Clive said.

"Nor should he," Hester said, her voice full of warning. "I checked-in with Emir, today, and there has been an unusual development. One of the others who reached that final stage has gone missing, along with everyone who accompanied them to Greenstone. Gone without a trace, leaving all their possessions behind."

"Some secrets are best left dead and buried," Jason said, "lest you be buried with them. I imagine that some of you will speculate as to the meaning of what happened. Keep that speculation to yourself, for all our sakes."

"That mirrors the advice Emir asked me to impart," Hester said. "I was going to wait until after we returned for the evening to tell you, but since the topic came up it seemed appropriate."

Jason was frustrated at having no one to discuss it with, if only to act as a sounding board. As the others continued to watch the viewing screen, his mind was consumed with possibilities. If the Order of the Reaper wanted to remain secret, why would they act so blatantly? Were they preparing for a grand reappearance or were they not involved at all? If Jason wanted to kill someone who had also reached that secret last stage, the Order of the Reaper would make an intimidating, if risky patsy.

He reflected again on how in this world, the answer to every question and the solution to every problem was the same: get stronger. He had been putting off his final awakening stones for the Reaper trials and while he couldn't be sure if the legendary stones he acquired were worth the delay, he suspected his new familiars were formidable.

He could feel them in his shadow and his aura, much as he could feel his first familiar inside his blood. They felt like power, waiting to be unleashed, and it was only the beginning. While Jason was still iron-rank, he still felt within the realms of a normal human, whatever Clive said about the strange inner workings of his body. Bronze-rank was the threshold beyond which the ordinary was left behind, surpassing even the most exceptional normal person.

The very concept of reaching those levels was bizarre and exciting. Stronger than an Olympic power-lifter and more agile than an Olympic gymnast at the same time. His perception was linked to his spirit attribute, which left him wondering what that would mean. Telescopic vision? Seeing the infrared spectrum, or hearing ultrasonic sounds?

In a world of monsters, magic, adventurers and cultists, it somehow was all acceptable. When considered within the context of his own world, it suddenly became impossible and absurd. Was there really a place for him there, anymore? Did he want it? Absently he took out the world-phoenix token, turning it over in his hands.

Knowledge told him it would take him home, but could he trust the words of the goddess? It looked very much like the Reaper token he had already used. Would it trigger another gift evolution? How was he meant to use it? The goddess told him that he lacked the faith in magic. Jason was no longer an atheist but that did not mean he was willing to jump into faith. He liked believing in things for good reason.

Sophie got up from her chair to grab some food and spotted Jason, uncharacteristically quiet as he looked at something in his hands. She crashed down next to him on the couch he was using.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” Jason said, putting the tablet away. “The future, maybe.”

The team were making their way through the streets of Jayapura, back toward Tilly’s nondescript tattoo parlour. As they floated along on their discs, the topic of discussion was postulation on the nature of Jason’s personal crest.

“I bet it’s just a picture of him with an idiotic grin and a sandwich,” Neil said.

“I think it’ll be something intimidating,” Clive said. “Look at his familiars. It’ll be all dark and spooky.”

“How is Jason in any way intimidating?” Neil asked.

“Try fighting him,” Sophie said. “I’m the only one here who’s done it for real. I had a well-executed plan, meticulous preparation and, as it turned out, a silver-ranker intervening on my behalf. Even then, it took a priest of the god of healing and an alchemist healer

working together to keep me alive and he wasn't even trying to kill me. He makes people like you think he's an idiot because otherwise, they'd run for the hills."

"She exaggerates," Jason said. "I'm with Neil. I think it's going to be sandwich-related."

"What about you, Humphrey?" Clive asked. "You've known him longer than the rest of us."

"I don't know what his crest will be," Humphrey said. "I suppose I can say what I want it to be."

The others looked over at Humphrey, their interest piqued. Neil turned his eyes back to where he was going, though, when he almost drove his disc into a wall.

"What do you mean?" Sophie asked, looking between Humphrey and Jason. Humphrey's expression was sober and thoughtful, Jason's blank and unreadable. He had mostly stayed quiet during their guessing game.

"Jason is good at putting on masks to get what he wants," Humphrey said. "He becomes what he needs to be to provoke the response he's looking for, whether it's absurd buffoon, or callous killer. I've seen him be friendly and approachable with ordinary people, sharp and provoking toward aristocrats. He'll stare down silver-rankers and capitulate to his landlady. I'd like to see who he is under all that. Which parts of what he shows us is really who he is."

The others all looked at Jason, who remained impassively silent.

"Damn," Neil said. "That got heavy fast."

The rest of the trip took place in awkward silence. When they reached the tattoo shop, Tilly took in the strange air over them and nodded toward the back room without saying anything.

Jason stripped off his shirt as Tilly adjusted the chair so she could work on his back. She took out a series of pots, some of which were faintly glowing, and set them out on a table, along with a set of brushes.

"You have the crest?"

Jason took the immortal crest out from his inventory. Tilly took a stick of chalk from her pocket, scrawling some symbols on it as Jason held it in place. Then she ushered him onto the chair, telling him to hold it to his chest. He did so, placing it over the sigil of his magic tattoo.

Tilly began drawing an intricate magical diagram on Jason's back, using the brushes and paint she had set out. She would stop frequently, her face caught up in thought as if pondering what to do next. Sometimes she would make slow progress, a minute or more

passing between strokes of the brush. Other times would be a fury of activity as she wildly applied whole sections, her seeming haste having no ill-effect on her precision.

Her brushes dipped into one pot after another as every part of Jason's back was filled with tiny, precise lines and sigils. The diagram was drawn out in ordinary black, vibrant blue, shimmering silver and bright gold. Finally, she put down her brush and wheeled the table away, pulling up another one. She took out a rolled-up cloth and unfurled it on the table, revealing a dazzling array of needles. Some were silver, others, black, green, red and gold. She started pulling them out and poking them into Jason's back, one after another. By the time she was done, Jason's back was a forest of metal, the elaborate diagram completely obscured.

She moved away from the chair, taking out a tarp and setting it on the workshop floor.

"Get up and go stand on that," she instructed and Jason did so.

"Now we wait," she said.

They all stood in silence, Jason's eyes glued to the floor. Sophie and Humphrey had their gazes locked on Jason while the others shared awkward glances. Just as the silence grew so heavy it felt like someone had to say something, there was a dull sound as a needle fell from Jason's back and onto the tarp. It was followed by a second, third, rapidly increasing until they started cascading from his back to form a pile around his feet.

No one said anything for a moment.

"Well?" Neil asked, breaking the silence. "Turn around and let us see."

"He sees first," Tilly said, her tone brooking no dissent. She took a sheet of dark glass the size of a large book, holding it behind Jason's back for a moment, then passing to Jason to look at. He held the glass in his hands, staring for a long time at the image it had recorded from his back. Finally he nodded, handing the glass back to Tilly.

"It's a good one," she said, "but you don't have to show them. You don't have to show anyone, if you don't want."

"It's fine," Jason said, stepping carefully out of the needles at his feet. Then he turned around, allowing the others to see.

On his back was the image of a dark, empty cloak, not unlike his new familiar, Gordon. Around the cloak was a dark sky full of silver stars. Inside the cloak was an open blue sky, with a golden sun right where Gordon's nebula eye was located, right in the middle of the chest.

"Is it shining?" Clive asked, squinting his eyes. Tilly walked over to the wall, tapping a crystal. Shutters came down over the windows and the glow-stones in the workshop dimmed to nothing. In the darkness, the only light was the faint glow of the sun and stars

on Jason's back. They softly illuminated his new crest, the silver stars highlighting the dark sky and the gold light of the sun lighting up the bright portion in the middle.

"It looks like the day, hidden in the night," Humphrey said.

"Yep," Sophie said. "That's going to get you laid, alright."

Chapter 187

The Last Reward

In the early morning, Jason stood at the edge of a platform in the underground grotto, looking out to the cave entrance and the ocean beyond. Daylight was yet to penetrate the west-facing cave and the illumination was still provided by the colourful glow-stones shining from beneath the water.

"It's only been a couple of days, but I'm going to miss this," Jason said.

"It definitely beats hiding out in the back of a disused boat warehouse," Sophie said, emerging from her own room to join him in leaning on the rail.

"Still," Jason said, pushing himself off the railing. "There's a world of wonders waiting out there for us. Shall we go see if we can find it?"

"Sure," Sophie said, giving him a smile.

As they made their way up the spiral staircase, Jason happily reflected on Sophie finally not viewing any approach as some kind of attack. Reaching the top, an open terrace looking out over the cliff face to the ocean, Humphrey and Clive were already waiting for them.

"Ever since we haven't been actively hunted," Sophie said, "Lindy has taken to sleeping in."

"Very sensible," Neil said, emerging from the main house. "I know Humphrey has been planning dawn to dusk training for when we get back, so this might be our last lazy morning for a while."

"Night training as well," Humphrey said, not denying it. "We can't be ready for every circumstance, but we can try."

Belinda and Hester appeared together.

"Thank you for the generous hospitality," Jason said. "Especially for those of us who haven't left Greenstone before, this was a great experience."

The time they had spent awakening abilities, summoning familiars and getting tattoos had only been a portion of their several days in Jayapura. They had also taken in the city, visiting markets and the city's various places of interest. New customs, new food. New sights and sounds, tastes and smells.

Jason had always wanted to travel, until circumstances derailed his life plans. Instead of finishing university he had taken a job in retail and barely travelled beyond a few city blocks. More and more, his new life had him reflecting on his old one.

Hester opened up a portal and they stepped through, arriving at the district of the Island called Marina North. Jason knew it quite well, having travelled through it frequently. It contained the bridge he most often used to cross between Old City and the Island, and was the place he first met – and was kicked in the face by – Sophie.

They were at one of the marinas for which the district was named. The entire east side of the island was lined with marinas, holding the private watercraft of the city's elite. Trade shipping was restricted to the sprawling port on the Old City side, with the Island serving as a vast breakwater.

Emir was waiting for them, along with Constance. They were in an open area beside the main marina building, the area pleasantly laid out with subdued green and yellow pavers.

"Excellent," he greeted as they arrived. "I hope you had a nice trip home, Hester. I need to put my logistics coordinator to work."

"Of course," Hester said amenably.

"Constance has the details," Emir said. "She can fill you in while I attend to Jason. Are you ready for your cloud...well, not palace, yet."

"I definitely am," Jason said.

"My cloud palace is still at the lake, since my people are now largely concerned with studying the underwater complex. I've taken the liberty of renting marina space for you to use, by which I mean I had Constance do it. She has all the paperwork, so see her about all that after. It's nothing you can't afford."

Emir reached into his jacket and pulled a large flask from the dimensional space within. It was round, with a cylindrical neck, identical to the one that Emir used for his own cloud palace. Through the glass they could see energy swirling inside, a vortex of blue and white. He handed the bottle to Jason, who immediately dropped what turned out to be the profoundly heavy object.

"Oh, right," Emir said. "I forgot how weak iron-rankers are."

"Did I break it?" Jason asked in horror, looking down at the bottle laying on the stone pavers.

"Don't worry about that," Emir said, gesturing to the stone, three storey building beside them. "You could drop this building on that bottle and it wouldn't get so much as a scratch."

He took out a notebook, thumbing through pages until he found what he was after and passed it over to Clive.

“Can you knock that one out for me?” Emir asked. “It might be a little tricky.” Clive only spent a moment glancing over notes before he started drawing out a ritual circle using his power. Passers-by looked over in curiosity as golden light traced out a magic diagram. When he was done, Emir picked up the bottle and carried it into the middle of the circle, directing Jason to join him.

“You won’t need to enact the ritual, Clive,” Emir said. “Jason just needs to drop a little blood into the bottle. Just a few drops will do it.”

Emir took the glass stopper out of the bottle and Jason nicked a finger with the blade under his wristband. He kept it there even when not wearing his combat gear in case he needed to call out Colin in a pinch.

The droplets of blood fell into the bottle and Emir stoppered it again as the contents swirled about wildly. Despite only losing a few drops of blood, Jason felt suddenly drained. The mana and stamina bars at the periphery of his vision emptied and he staggered before righting himself.

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- You have bound [Cloud Flask] to you.
 - [Cloud Flask] is currently iron rank.
 - You can summon, dismiss and alter the iron-rank options of your [Cloud Flask].
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After Jason tipped mana and stamina potions down his throat, Emir held out the flask for Jason to take.

“That didn’t go so well last time,” Jason said, but took the proffered bottle, nonetheless. To his surprise, the bottle now was so light as to be almost weightless. He could feel a connection to the energy inside it, not dissimilar to the sense of his familiars he had while they were subsumed within his body.

Item: [Cloud Flask] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

- This item is bound to you and cannot be used by anyone else.
 - Use the energies within the cloud flask to create buildings and vehicles made of clouds. Available forms are restricted by rank.
 - Items contained within the cloud construct when it is returned to the flask are stored in a dimensional space and cannot be recovered until another cloud construct is formed.
 - Available forms (iron rank): Cloud house (grand), cloud house (adaptive).
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“Soul-bound items are rare, even compared to other growth items,” Clive said. “Ten years in the Magic Society and this is only the third one I’ve seen. The advancement requirements are usually quite prohibitive.”

Jason looked over the growth requirements.

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- 1000 [Air Quintessence (bronze)].
 - 1000 [Water Quintessence (bronze)].
 - 200 [Dimension Quintessence (bronze)].
 - 10,000 [Bronze Spirit Coins]
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“Oh, that’s a lot,” Jason said. “Really, a lot.”

“Not to worry,” Emir said. “I have everything you need to upgrade it to bronze. You can grab it all next time you’re in the cloud palace. After that, you’re in charge of your own supplies, though.”

“Thank you,” Jason said gratefully. “That’s very generous.”

“I think it’s time to try it out,” Emir said. He led the group to find the right pier, where he had leased three adjacent berths to make sure Jason had the room he needed.

“So, how does it work?” Jason asked. “Do I just open the bottle?”

“That’s the first step,” Emir said. “Do that now.”

Jason opened the bottle and mist flowed out, shifting in colour as it formed a small image of a house in the air. It looked like a small manor, in the sunset colours they all recognised from the cloud palace.

“Here you can choose which configuration of house you want to use,” Emir told him. “What you’re looking at now is the grand form. Put your hand into the image and turn it.”

Jason did as instructed and the image changed, from a manor to a large house boat.

“That’s the adaptive form,” Emir explained. “It won’t be as large as the grand form but it will fit into its surroundings much better, even camouflaging itself. Good for unusual environments or when you don’t want to make a spectacle. Once I used the adaptive form of the palace in a forest and got a series of tree-houses connected by swinging bridges. It was amazing.”

“How do I set it off?” Jason asked.

“Once you’ve picked your form,” Emir said, “concentrate on where you want it to go and just give it a push.”

Jason left the small image in the form of a houseboat and shoved it with his hand. The image broke apart as fog started pouring out of the bottle and into the empty space along the marina dock. They watched as the fog slowly took the form of a large houseboat,

with three imposing storeys and clearly too ponderous to move. It took some ten minutes to achieve its final shape, after which the cloud-stuff from which it was constructed started taking on the look of painted wood until it was indistinguishable from an actual wooden houseboat.

“I would have picked you for going with the grand version,” Emir said. “What’s the point of having a cloud palace if no one knows about it?”

“Enjoying it for yourself,” Jason said. “I’m not gold rank, Emir. I have to be judicious about how and when I make a spectacle of myself.”

“You do?” Clive asked.

“It seems more like you’re making it up as you go along,” Neil said.

“Of course I am,” Jason said. “But when it works out, you have to tell everyone that you planned it all along.”

Emir burst out laughing. “Exactly right.”

They went aboard, discovering that the houseboat’s facade was just that, with the interior being constructed from the familiar cloud-stuff. They toured around, discovering several bedrooms, two entertaining decks and a formidable kitchen.

“Every cloud building has certain similarities,” Emir explained as they explored. “They all have their own nuances, however, reflective of their owners. My houses, for example, never have kitchens in them.”

“That’s actually common with soul-bound items,” Clive said. “No magic item can match the potential contained within a soul, so items connected to one tend to take on it’s properties. This becomes more pronounced with growth items as they advance in rank.”

“So, you could use a person’s soul-bound items to judge their true nature,” Humphrey said.

“Oh, yes,” Clive said. “If you meet someone who seems like a good person but has a hideous and twisted soul-bound item, stay clear. Compare that to Emir’s cloud palace, which is so obviously a reflection of him. Outrageously grandiose, yet welcoming and beautiful.”

“Clive,” Emir said warmly. “That may be the nicest thing anyone has ever said about me. Speaking of revealing the true nature, though, Hester said you were getting a personal crest, Jason. I have to admit to being curious.”

“It’s just me eating a sandwich with a big stupid grin,” Jason said. “It’s kind of embarrassing, to be honest.”

Emir gave Jason a sceptical look but didn’t challenge his assertion.

“You should be careful not to rely on the security of this cloud house,” Emir warned, turning the subject back to Jason’s new abode. “Yours is only iron rank, so a bronze-ranker could force their way in given enough time. With the right skill set, someone could even sneak their way inside. I imagine that even Clive and Belinda could do just that, if they put their heads together. As it ranks up you’ll find it becomes increasingly more resistant to all forms of trespass.

Jason discovered, as they roamed around, that he was quickly gaining a sense for the houseboat, even able to sense the people inside. Emir walked Jason through the various functions, such as taking aura imprints to allow others to have various permissions.

“There are some other things that I’ve figured out from using my own cloud flask,” Emir said, giving Jason the notebook he had handed to Clive, earlier. “Everything I’ve learned is collected here. I direct your attention especially to the section on plants, which is the product of many years of trial and error.”

“Thank you, Emir,” Jason said, taking the notebook.

“I’m glad it was you,” Emir said, “although, I will admit to being a little surprised. You had some impressive competition, which you apparently made friends with. The boats have left already, but several notable groups stayed behind and will have to make their own arrangements. They’ve been waiting for you to get back.”

“It sounds like a housewarming party is in order,” Jason said. ‘I’ll have to get some supplies.”

“Nothing too raucous,” Humphrey said. “Tomorrow, we start training in earnest.”

“We also have to sort out living arrangements,” Jason said. “With the cloud palace off at Sky Scar Lake, you and Lindy, Wexler, should probably shack up here. Unless you want to make your own arrangements.”

“And give up cloud beds?” Belinda said. “No chance.”

“There’s about eight bedrooms in here,” Jason said. “Any of the rest of you are welcome to join them. It could be good for team building.”

“I’ll take you up on that,” Clive said. “I’ve been living in the Magic Society dorm for years.”

“That’s a great idea,” Humphrey said. “We can regulate our training so much better if we’re all together.”

Neil groaned. “You’re really going to let Humphrey push us through training every waking minute?”

“You say that,” Jason said, “but you train as hard as anyone. You can act as disaffected all you like, but we all know how driven you are.”

“And what happens when Humphrey starts planning the meals for maximum effectiveness?” Neil asked.

Jason’s eye’s went wide.

“Now that I think about it,” he said, “maintaining a respectful separation may be what’s best for the team.”

Chapter 188

Impossible Wasn't Enough

In a training hall within the Adventure Society campus, Prince Valdis was squaring off against Rufus. Both held training swords that would leave a painful sting but not inflict any permanent damage.

Valdis moved swiftly, rushing around Rufus while delivering a flurry of rapid but precise strikes. Rufus was more languid, moving with slow, consistent steps as he deflected every attack with almost dismissive ease. He remained on the defensive yet never seemed pressured, casually throwing out the occasional attack to disrupt Valdis' rhythm.

By the time their practice session was done, Valdis was laying in a sweating heap as Rufus wiped down the swords and returned them to the rack on the wall.

"You're not too bad," Rufus said. "Once you stop trying to be my grandfather and start fighting your own way, you might actually become good."

"Thank you for doing this," Valdis said, pushing himself to his feet.

"Of course," Rufus said. "I spoke to my grandfather the other day through a water speaking chamber and he expressed his respect for your father. Have you seen the speaking chambers they have here?"

"Yes, I used one to tell my mother that my team would be staying in Greenstone for a while. They have impressive chambers here for such an out of the way city."

"I've found this city to be full of surprises," Rufus said.

"I should have suspected as much from the place that produced the Geller family," Valdis said. "Is it true your academy is establishing an annex here?"

"It is," Rufus said. "It's my personal project, but my attention has been drawn away by other matters."

"This business with the astral spaces is certainly concerning," Valdis said. "Do you think this cult used the Reaper trials to place people inside the astral space?"

"Almost certainly," Rufus said. "Emir's people are seeing if getting inside is any more feasible now the trials are completed."

Valdis walked over to the side of the room, taking a stamina potion from his dimensional bag and drinking it.

"Jason Asano is a friend of yours, right?" Valdis asked. "Did you imagine he would be the one who succeeded in the trials?"

"Yes," Rufus said.

“Really? I never saw him in action during the trials but I’ve seen some recordings since. He’s coming along with his skills and mastering his power set, but there were dozens of people participating with better training, superior skills and greater mastery of their abilities.”

Rufus chuckled.

“The day I met Jason I learned that something being impossible wasn’t enough to stop him. My grandfather has a lot of sayings about adventurers and I find Jason tends to remind me of them. I’m guessing your father has a few sayings of his own.”

Valdis laughed.

“More than a few.”

“Well,” Rufus said, “you wondered how someone with less skill and less training could beat out all these people like you. What would your father say?”

Valdis thought Rufus question over for a moment.

“One of my father’s sayings,” he said, finally, “is that mastering your powers can make you good adventurer, but only a good one. To be a great adventurer, you have to master destiny.”

“That’s a little overdramatic, but a good enough point,” Rufus said. “Around half a year ago, I was in as bad a situation as I’ve ever been in. I thought of this place as an isolated backwater and underestimated the dangers. I let my team get ambushed and we were caged up with suppression collars, waiting to be killed. I was certain we were going to die.”

“Obviously that didn’t happen,” Valdis said.

“No,” Rufus said. “That was when I met Jason. He was in a worse situation than we were. He had only been in our world a matter of hours and had no idea of what was going on. He came from a world with no magic, no monsters, no essences. I had to tell him what a spirit coin was. He was caged up with us, no suppression collar but his only essence abilities were falling slowly and seeing in the dark.”

“He helped you escape?”

“Helped? He broke out and released us, only for us to confront the bronze-rankers who caught us and get punished because we still had the suppression collars. So Jason stepped in. Two essence abilities against two bronze-rankers, but they’re dead and we’re here.”

“How?”

“Exactly how you’d expect: by talking a lot of nonsense. Great adventurers are the ones who find their skills and powers aren’t enough and they win anyway. That’s why I wasn’t surprised when Jason was the one who grabbed the scythe.”

“You know, someone from my team almost beat him to it.”

“Then make sure they stay on your team.”

Valdis thanked Rufus again and went for the shower room, while Rufus left. On his way out of the building, a voice came from a shadow.

“A word, please, Mr Remore.”

Rufus moved closer.

“Mr Dorgan,” Rufus said. “I was beginning to wonder if I would hear from you again.”

“I think we both know the kind of risks involved in what you’ve asked of me,” Dorgan said. “I don’t even trust messengers with this information.”

Rufus’ gaze grew sharp. “You have something?”

“Yes.”

“Should we be talking here?” Rufus asked.

“Don’t forget who my daughter is,” Dorgan said. “This seems like a casual conversation, but no small effort has been made to keep it and my presence here private. The closest set of ears is your young prince friend, who is being watched.”

“What do you have?” Rufus asked.

“I told you last time we met that someone was covering up every trace. You told me who, which gave me something to work with, but looking into a church’s activities is delicate business. Normally bribes and blackmail are reliable tools, but people get real committed when religion gets involved. You never know when zeal is going to throw good sense out the window, especially with the church of Purity.”

“I understand.”

“Once the Mercer’s went crazy and started rooting everything out, everything changed. These cultist pricks started pulling everything out of the city and mistakes were made. Making the most of other’s mistakes is what I do best. I managed to track some supplies that were taken out of the city in a rush, without the usual careful cut-outs.”

“And?”

“There’s an island,” Dorgan said. “All those materials you had me tracking that passed through the city before mysteriously vanishing? That’s where they’ve been going.”

“You have a location?”

Dorgan handed Rufus an envelope.

“Everything I have is in there.”

“Who knows about this?”

“I’ve been keeping the people I’m using apart from one another,” Dorgan said. “None of them know enough to put anything together and all of them know enough not to try and find out more. All they know is that I’ve been running this thing personally, which I never do. Even my daughter doesn’t know any more than I’m doing something for you.”

“What about the people keeping this meeting private?” Rufus asked.

“She made sure they can’t listen in, and they’re all people she brought into the Adventure Society herself. They’re loyal.”

Rufus looked at the envelope in his hands, nodding gravely.

“Thank you, Dorgan.”

“You aren’t the only one concerned about these people, you know,” Dorgan said. “You might look down on me but I’m part of this community. The people of Old City are my people.”

Rufus nodded, offering his hand for Dorgan to shake.

“I’ll remember that,” Rufus said. “Your daughter will have my support in her position, for what it’s worth.”

Dorgan accepted Rufus’ handshake.

“I thought you might hold a grudge,” Dorgan said. “I know you lost a friend on that expedition.”

“There’s plenty of blame to go around,” Rufus said. “I know who the enemy is.”

“Rufus isn’t here?” Valdis asked. “I was training with him just this morning.”

Jason was having a small gathering on his cloud houseboat, largely of adventurers who had been through the Reaper trials. A number of teams had stayed behind, deciding to use Greenstone’s lower-ranked monsters for some experience operating independently. This included Valdis’ team and Padma’s, both of whom were present at Jason’s party.

“Probably best not to talk about that,” Humphrey said quietly. “He took off out of the city with my parents and some other silver rankers late this morning.”

Rick Geller and his team were also present. Rick and his sister Phoebe had both reached bronze rank during the trials and would soon be returning to their home city. Going with them would be Dustin, Neil’s friend who had once suffered with him as Thadwick’s lackey.

Humphrey’s sister, Henrietta, was also in attendance. She had been bronze-rank for almost two years, now returned to Greenstone with their father in readiness for the

monster surge. They originally hadn't intended to, but with the increasing delay, they took the chance to visit home.

"Henri has agreed to help us train," Humphrey enthusiastically explained to his teammates. "She has the full set of familiars and summons, which is an area we really need to work on. We've really been underutilising the ones we have and now we have even more."

Jason looked at Henrietta, looking them over in turn. She was statuesque, like her brother, with strong, handsome features and hair cropped practical and short. Jason had now met Humphrey's father, seeing that the siblings both favoured the burly man in physique, compared to their slender mother.

Jason smiled to himself. It was plain that Henrietta was less interested in helping them train than in making sure the ragtag group Humphrey had assembled was good enough for her little brother.

"You find something funny?" she asked Jason.

"Invariably," Jason said with a laugh.

With so many new abilities, Jason and his team had immense amounts of work to do. Humphrey was as good as his promise at driving the team's training, from the basics on up. Physical training, movement training and meditation took up the mornings, then more individualised work to master their abilities in the afternoons.

Jason's training fell into two areas. Along with his new familiars, he started incorporating his new shadow arm power into his combat style. What at first seemed like a simple addition to his repertoire turned out to be a highly flexible power, both literally and figuratively. More than just being a much-welcomed source of necrotic afflictions, it offered incredible utility when incorporated into his parkour and martial arts.

It was while learning to use the shadow arm that he began to understand just how comprehensive the Way of the Reaper fighting style truly was. It had technique for incorporating various powers into movement and even martial technique. This included reach and teleport powers, such as Jason's, as well movement powers.

Sophie was undergoing a similar revelation, even more so with her larger number of new powers. They practiced the same style but her techniques didn't come from a skill book. This gave her a stronger foundation than Jason but meant she didn't already have the techniques she required and had to turn to the books they brought back from the Reaper trials to advance her knowledge.

Humphrey had gifted her his set of the Way of the Reaper books as he had his own fighting style and no intention to switch. Shade had once demonstrated the ability of the books to create a projection that offered guidance on the content of the books. Shade himself, however, was a far superior guide. Once the familiar to one of the old Order of the Reaper's leaders, Shade was well versed in their techniques. His active assistance was better than anything to be found in a book, even a skill book.

Each of Jason's three familiars brought something different to the table. Colin had proven his value time and again as an affliction bulk-delivery system that was incredibly hard to dislodge because of his swarm nature. The remaining two familiars, despite both being intangible cloak-shaped entities, were very different.

Shade offered little in the way of direct combat impact, only able to drain mana. His function was primarily one of utility. In addition to being an effective spy, Jason could teleport in and out of his shadowy figure. Placed judiciously around a battlefield, he made Jason all the more mobile. He could also be deposited in the shadow of enemies, almost impossible to detect, turning them into beacons from which Jason could discreetly spy while remaining hidden.

Gordon, by contrast, was the most directly combative aspect of Jason's arsenal, including Jason himself. The twin orbs floating around Gordon each blasted out sustained, destructive beams. One beam was orange, inflicting resonating-force that penetrated armour. The other was blue, delivering disruptive-force that was effective against magical protection and incorporeal enemies. The beams weren't wildly powerful, but they were too strong to ignore, tracked their targets and never relented.

Gordon was an incorporeal entity himself, barely affected by most forms of attack. Magic had a limited effect, but only disruptive-force attacks posed him a real threat. Part of the team's versatile nature was that many of them had such attacks, from Sophie's unarmed strikes to Clive's legendary weapons and Humphrey's new special attack, spirit reaper. During mock battles in the Geller mirage chamber, they would frequently go after Gordon to put a stop to his unrelenting attacks. He had the power to rapidly evade, however, transforming into a blue-orange cloud that could dash across the battlefield before he reformed to resume his attacks. The best deterrent turned out to be Belinda's lantern familiar, which had disruptive-force attacks of its own.

On top of their damage, Gordon's beam attacks doled out a stacking affliction that made enemies more susceptible to further afflictions by diminishing their resistances. It quickly became evident that the affliction or even the damage was not what made Gordon such an effective tool for Jason. It was the fact that Gordon's attacks, while not

overwhelming, were both powerful enough to require a response and completely unrelenting.

To a mindless monster, Gordon's continual attacks would be a constant source of threat, at least one of the beams effective against almost any kind of defence. To a more intelligent enemy they would recognise the threat Gordon would pose if left unchecked. Many healers and ranged magic users, like Clive and Neil, possessed magical shields that would protect them long enough for a guardian to intervene. A constant barrage of disruptive force would quickly penetrate that barrier and no team of essence users was stupid enough to leave the healer exposed.

Gordon's presence on the battlefield was not overpowering but it did require an answer, forcing the enemy out of their own pace and right into Jason's. A distracted enemy, reacting instead of acting was exactly the scenario in which his hit-and-run style thrived, the fires of chaos fed as he appeared and disappeared, loading up the enemy with afflictions.

Jason thought back to his fight against Rick's team. He no longer had the need to resort to extravagant theatrics to keep enemies off balance. With Gordon to force an enemy's hand and Shade for stealth and mobility, Jason wouldn't have to work so hard to crack a team's formation. Even in an open environment he could jump from one of Shade's duplicates to another, swift and elusive as the enemy still had Gordon to deal with. While his opponents scrambled to pin him down, he would be baiting them into the perfect place to unleash Colin, showering them in apocalypse beast.

All of that was when he was operating alone. Working with the team, there were several strategies open to him. For extremely tough opponents he would be the main damage dealer. He could be to his team what Gordon was to him; a distraction the enemy couldn't ignore lest it ruin them all. They could also flip that role, with the team engaging the enemy as Jason went around afflicting them all.

They devised a wide array of strategies for all manner of situations, varied enough to apply broadly and flexible enough to adapt to specifics. As they developed and refined their strategies, it became evident that rather than any individual strength, the team's greatest asset was flexibility. The versatility of their potential strategies made their defining trait the power to dictate the pacing of a battle.

Their efforts were excessive for fighting iron-rank monsters but they had their sights set higher. Monsters would become more intelligent at higher ranks, their powers more exotic. In the short term, there was no telling when they might find themselves in battle

with Builder cultists. They worked up specific strategies for what they knew about the cult and their tactics, Jason focusing on the controllers as the team contained the constructs.

Each evening, the team would wind-down after their training on the deck of the houseboat, frequently joined by another team. Some, like Beth's team, were mirroring Jason's in pouring themselves into training. Foreign teams like Valdis' and Padma's were enjoying the freedom of undertaking contracts without supervision. Padma's team mostly stayed around for Rufus who, along with Gary, had claimed the two empty bedrooms on the houseboat while the cloud palace was still off at the lake.

Beth put the idea of some more contests in the mirage arena to Humphrey. Humphrey begged off each time, seeing only how far the team had to go. Finally, Jason weighed in on the other side.

"It's time we had some pressure on us," Jason told him. "We have to put the team in the fire to see if we cook."

Chapter 189

Eclipse

The strike force had been small, to restrict information. Three gold-rankers, six silver-rankers and a dozen bronze-rankers. Rufus' parents, Gabriel and Arabelle, along with their teammate, Callum, were the golds. The silvers were Danielle Geller, Thalia Mercer, Elspeth Arella, Emir's chief of staff, Constance, and two more silver-rankers under Emir's employ. The bronze were Rufus, Gary and ten more of Emir's people, under Constance's command.

They arrived on the island in the dead of night. To avoid sharp senses they used no abilities, magical items or even magically-propelled vessels, instead sailing on ordinary ships and rowing ashore in dinghies. Only once they had eyes on the island's inhabitants were they sure that the enemy had not been forewarned. As expected, the cultists outnumbered them, even discounting the small army of construct creatures standing idle in rows.

To their good fortune, the island the cultists were occupying was not inhabited for a reason. The terrain was harsh, with the few flat, usable areas isolated from one another by ridges and gorges. There was very little plant life, mostly barren rocks, but the wild landscape of cliffs and rises gave them plenty of places to hide away.

The harsh topography forced the cultists to segment themselves into a series of camps and outposts, scattered around the island. Some were clearly well-established, with buildings of hewn brick or stone warped through essence abilities. For most, however, they were stuck with tents pitched onto rock or, for the lucky ones, hard-packed earth.

The best scout they had was Callum, the gold-ranked assassination specialist. He set out to reconnoitre while the others waited, quiet and hidden, for his return.

Gabriel looked at his son, whose schooled expression couldn't quite hide the rage behind his eyes. Rufus' mind seared with the memory of Farrah's death. With the panicked, unexpected battle and every mistake he made along the way. If he'd fought the way he should, the way he'd been taught, then maybe he could have bought those fleeting few seconds he hadn't known he needed before Danielle's intervention.

He reflected again on his lack of experience. His whole life he had been told of the amazing adventurer he was going to be, all the while shielding him from ever truly being responsible for himself. He had become sloppy and complacent, which quickly became evident once he arrived in Greenstone and fell into the hands of the blood cultists.

It became clear to him that for all his superbly trained, bronze-ranked might, the reality was that he was wildly inexperienced. The value of the Geller family's approach of raising their members with the most potential in a place where they could be responsible for themselves proved more and more true. He didn't realise just how great a deficit he faced until he was standing over Farrah's fallen body.

Since Farrah's death, Rufus' mind had been consumed with the next fight. He put aside luxuries and rest, spending every moment he could spare preparing for the next time he would face the cultists. If his father didn't have time to train with him then Emir, his mother, Danielle, or anyone stronger than him would do. If he couldn't find someone stronger then he trained others. Growing up in an academy he knew that teaching others could be a learning experience for yourself. Only when his parents, Gary or Jason forced him to take a break would he stop to rest or engage in some social activity. Even then, the fight to come was a fire in his mind.

Rufus had always been hailed as a prodigy, even amongst his family who trained the best adventurers in the world. Since coming to Greenstone he had failed to live up to that, time and again. No more. He was going to bring every bit of training, every bit of experience to the fight. They would suffer for every lesson he had learned, from every mistake he had made.

"Son," Gabriel said.

"I know," Rufus said. "Put the rage in a box and only take it out when I need it."

"Easier said than done," his mother, Arabelle, told him.

"The anger doesn't help me," Rufus said, his voice cold. "Last time I didn't fight the way I know I can. I was on the back foot, letting myself be caught up instead of making the battle my own. My eyes are clear."

Gabriel and Arabelle shared a look but didn't say any more. Shortly after, Callum returned.

"We have confirmation," he told them. "Priests of Purity are here. In full colours, no less. They're clearly confident we don't know about this place."

"Did you get a recording for proof?" Arella asked.

Callum shook his head. "There's a gold-rank priest down there. Too much chance he would have sensed it."

"We'll use recording crystals when we attack," Danielle said. "Just the one gold ranker?"

Callum nodded.

"What kind of numbers are we looking at, Cal?" Gabriel asked.

Callum started taking them through the numbers and dispositions of the priests and cultists on the island. There were more than a dozen different camps. They strategised a plan of attack, the low numbers that had given them this chance now their biggest weakness.

“We aren’t going to get them all, whichever way we go,” Callum said. “The portal devices set up at various points around the camp will probably serve as escape points once they realise things are going wrong. They may even run straight for them. Destroy them if you can but don’t take any undue risks. We have trouble enough with the numbers.”

“If they have as many portal devices as you described,” Danielle said, “then they really do have better astral magic than we do.”

“How do you get that from just a lot of portals?” Gary asked.

“The cost,” Danielle said. “If they had the resources it would take to make that many portal devices with our knowledge, they could have mounted a very different operation.”

Ultimately, they decided to break into task-focused teams, trying to sweep through the camps as quickly as possible. The key reason they could take on such a larger force was that the disparity in rank made up for the disparity in numbers. Three gold-rankers to one was more than enough to even the odds, so long as they could bring that power to bear effectively. They hadn’t been expecting even one gold-ranker, so they had to put him down fast.

That was the task of team one. Their objective was to eliminate the leadership, the gold-rank priest, his silver-rank followers and the silver-rankers from the cult. Team one was the smallest but most powerful, consisting of all the gold-rankers and most of the silver. The goal was to finish their task quickly and move to support the others. The enemy only had one gold-ranker to their three, and their three were all top-tier by any measure.

Elsbeth Arella would lead a second team to engage the construct monsters, wiping them out before they could be brought to bear elsewhere. The largest contingent of constructs were gathered in the largest camp, which was where they would strike first.

The third team, led by Constance, would seek to sweep the bulk of the cultist forces of bronze-rank and below. The leadership were gathered together in the least awful of the island’s outposts, while the remainder of their forces were scattered around the various camps.

The bulk of their own bronze-rankers would be split between teams two and three. They would both face superior numbers, but again, they were relying on quality over quantity.

“We don’t have a way of taking cultists prisoner without them killing themselves, so don’t even try,” Gabriel said as they prepared to move. “We’re outnumbered, so remember that you might be stronger than any of your enemies, but you aren’t stronger than all of them. Reserve your strength as best you can. Staying alive until team one comes in to mop up is your top priority. The entire point of splitting up is so that they can’t consolidate. Hitting multiple points will hopefully get them thinking our numbers are greater than they seem until our gold-rankers are brought fully to bear and it’s too late.”

“What about the priests?” Gary asked. “Do we take them prisoner?”

“We don’t have the numbers,” Gabriel said. “If they aren’t one of us, put them down. Any that live to be taken as prisoners at the end is a bonus.”

“Assuming we win,” Arabelle added. “You all know your withdrawal points; a fighting retreat early is better than a rout later. The withdrawal points are defensive enough to hold until we come for you.”

The three teams struck under cover of darkness. Team one came down like the hammer of god, three gold-rankers erupting like an explosion. Gabriel blasted out waves of fire and wind with sweeps of his sword, turning everything they passed through to tumbling cinders. He moved swiftly, every move devastating as he crashed through the battlefield like the embodiment of wrath, delivering annihilation left and right as he bore down on the gold-rank priest.

Arabelle moved through like a breeze, the enemies she touched with her hand collapsing to withered husks. With each one, an urn, glowing red with life force appeared around her, ready to fuel her other powers. As the priests and cultists started fighting back, she used that life force to fuel potent healing magic and devastating attacks. Trailing behind her husband, however, she went unnoticed by few beyond her victims.

Gabriele, Arabelle and Callum had been companions for decades, falling into one another’s rhythms like dancers. Gabriel enacted his attention grabbing onslaught with Arabelle to cover his flanks and heal his injuries. Callum used that opportunity to hone in on the true objective. As the gold-rank priest prepared for the oncoming threat of Gabriel, Callum appeared behind him to strike.

Callum was an expert assassin and his abilities landed strong and true on the priest, to devastating effect. No gold-ranker would die easily, however, and even Callum’s prowess was not enough to secure the kill immediately. The priest was already healing as he responded to Callum’s assault, even as Gabriel and Arabelle moved closer.

The Silver-rankers were not as overwhelming as they clashed with their cultist counterparts and the rapidly-awakening construct monsters. Nonetheless, they were still

more than holding their own. Every member of the small force they had brought along was a powerhouse for their rank.

Team two struck the largest collection of constructs first, rows on rows of them arrayed like soldiers on parade. Elspeth Arella had not been chosen to lead it at random, the reasons for which were obvious as she immediately made devastating headway. Her telekinetic powers were constrained against people, requiring that she first penetrate their auras. Since the constructs had little more aura than an inert rock, she could wield her powers against them to full and spectacular effect.

She raised her arms out in front of her and entire clusters of the constructs floated up into the air. Waving her arms like a conductor, she had them smash into each other again and again until all that remained was a floating cloud of debris. She then flung her arms back down, sending the debris cloud clashing into the panicking cultists trying to send more of the constructs to their defence.

As Arella started the whole process over, the rest of team two surged forward with Gary at the lead. In his hand was a hammer he had forged himself, specifically to fight such enemies. The heavy head came down on the first construct he could reach, shattering it like glass. The others surged around him, having been picked out as most effective against their artificial enemies.

Team three has the largest number of actual cultists to deal with and Constance didn't have the kind of powers Arella did to make such a potent opening salvo. Worse was an unpleasant surprise, hidden amongst the cultists: three silver rankers to their one. Callum had scouted out all the silver-rankers but apparently they had moved camps while the team was plotting their attack.

The initial assault went well, with most of the cultists asleep in their tents. The attackers still didn't know of the silver rank surprise waiting in store, the first signs being a defence that was organised much more quickly than anticipated. The cultists were forming squads and awakening constructs in a swift and organised manner under the tyrannical control of the silver-rankers.

The element of surprise was soon overwhelmed by the numerical superiority as the cultists organised a counter-attack. Constance moved to try and curb the troubling response, which was when the silver-rankers revealed themselves. All three launched themselves at Constance, although her habitual caution prevented her from suffering as she responded with a careful and defensive drawing back. The moment she sensed three silver-rank auras, she loudly called for all her people to retreat.

The call almost came too late, with team three scattered by the cultist counteroffensive. It was a near thing but the team was saved by a swift and destructive force passing through the enemy, leaving death in its wake. Golden light of the sun and silver light of the moon alternated bright flashes as Rufus moved through the cultist ranks, untouchable and unstoppable.

His movements were swift and smooth, except when he flickered with a flash of sun or moonlight, vanishing from one spot to appear in another, one of his two swords securing a kill. In one hand he held a searing, golden sword. It passed through cultist and construct alike, as if his enemies were a soft cheese platter. In his other hand was a silver sword, almost impossible to see in motion. Unable to read its trajectory, it found a critical joint or soft throat before the enemy realised they were dead.

Those few who managed to survive the kiss of Rufus' blades were left with malign reminders. Those injured by the golden sword had a small orb of fire, a miniature golden sun, float around them, scorching them with the heat it put out. Those touched by the silver sword had a tiny moon instead. It soaking up heat instead of delivering it, chilling to the bone and sapping strength.

Rufus' path of death was marked by beautiful light. The tiny suns and moons shone brightly in the night. His power to speed up so quickly the world seemed to freeze left a trail of light where he moved. Cut-apart constructs and severed chunks of armour glowed red-hot from where his golden sword passed through.

With Constance fending off the silver-rankers, it was Rufus and his whirlwind efforts that extracted the bulk of team three, reducing their losses from near-total to only a few. A trail of death was left in his wake. Frustration squirmed through his mind as what was meant to be a vindicating attack became another fighting retreat, just like the last time.

His people were getting away and it was time to withdraw but anger blazed through him as this battle and the last merged together in his mind. He saw Constance fighting back against the silver-rankers the way he, Gary and Farrah had fought back the cultists and their creations.

Looking at Constance's battle in glances as he continued to massacre his way through the lower-ranked enemy, he first thought his mind was projecting. Then he looked again and saw he was right. One of the trio Constance was barely holding off was the man who killed Farrah. The same macabre mixture of flesh and steel.

Their people were on the retreat and he had to leave, he knew that. The last time he had faced the monstrosity it had bested him in moments, he knew that. It was time for him to go back. He knew that.

He went forward.

In the midst of the chaos, the cultist, Timos, was hurrying in the direction of the closest portal device. There was yelling and screaming, constructs lumbering into motion and cultists running back and forth. He had no idea how anyone had found them; they had been so careful. He realised, logically, that the flaw in their veil of secrecy most likely came from their church of Purity allies. His instincts, however, wanted to blame the man at his side.

“What are we going to do?” Thadwick asked in a panicked half-squeal.

“Shut up,” Timos snarled.

Against Timos’ emphatic recommendation, his superiors had not only decided to keep Thadwick alive in case there was some use for him, but made Timos’ responsible for the idiot. While others around him were running, wild with panic, he made purposeful strides for the portal as his mind silently piled a litany of hatred on Thadwick.

Everything had started to go wrong the moment Thadwick joined them, like a curse somehow sent from their enemies. Timos knew Thadwick wasn’t truly the engineer of their troubles, yet couldn’t dislodge the idea from his mind.

He saw the portal flare to life up ahead, shining silver-blue in the darkness. He considered leaving Thadwick behind and claiming he was lost in the chaos. The consequences of disobedience if the lie was discovered, however, still outweighed his hatred for Thadwick. He grabbed the fool by the front of his shirt and yanked him in the direction of the portal.

There was a trap in Rufus’ powers that he had been warned time and again not to fall into. It was a trap that many essences users had. Synergistic powers were potent, but one could easily spend so much time setting up the perfect moment that they died for missing the good one.

Now, Rufus was diving into the trap he had been drilled for years to avoid. Willing Constance to hold out, he didn’t make directly for the place the silver-rankers were fighting. Instead, he continued moving through the crowd of enemies, disappearing from one spot and appearing in another, accompanied by flashes of light.

Unlike Jason, Rufus didn’t have a teleport power he could use over and over again. Instead, he had a slew of powers that blended movement, teleportation, illusionary after-images and attacks. It took skill and practice to chain them all together in a dynamic environment, which is exactly what Rufus did with absolute confidence. By the time he

worked though his powers they became available all over again as he became an unstoppable dervish of light.

Now, Rufus was no longer going for the kill. With grazing wounds and minor cuts, his twin blades left a swarm of tiny suns and miniature moons behind as his swords flashed with absolute precision. He kept moving, kept slicing, cutting and moving forward, desperately urging Constance to hold out. Every time he caught a glimpse of the silver-rank battle she was being pressed harder and harder.

Gradually, a sea of tiny suns and tiny moons orbited amongst the crowd of enemies, construct and cultist alike. The enemy milled, their earlier coordination turning to confusion. Their leadership was caught up battling Constance, too busy to give the earlier direction. The enemy had retreated, leaving only Constance and the elusive dervish of light moving through them like a poltergeist.

Constance's voice cried out in a scream as a powerful attack penetrated the magical bubble shielding her. It had been key to withstanding the barrage of attacks she was subjected to but it was close to collapsing entirely. Rufus knew the time had come to act, and in any case, he had pushed himself to near collapse. His body and mind ached with the depletion of his stamina and mana. Turning finally toward the silver-rank battle, he tossed away his conjured swords and threw back the strongest recovery potion he had. He felt the fresh infusion of mana and stamina flush through his body like dipping into cool water. He activated his speed ability one more time.

Time seemed to freeze around him. Ahead, the three silver-rank abominations and Constance motionless before him like the painting of a battle. He did not use his fleeting moment of acceleration to attack, needing it to stop and chant a spell without suffering an attack from the enemies surrounding him.

“Darkness and light, sun and moon; be mine to awaken and move at my command. Mine is the realm and mine is the power; bring forth the kingdom of eclipse.”

Rufus' speed power came to an end just as he completed his chant and darkness, like some great explosion, swept over the battlefield. The stars in the sky were gone, as were the twin moons that had lit up the battle. Every glow-stone embedded in a construct or floating around a cultist went dim, leaving only the tiny suns and moon to cast light. The crowd of cultists cried out in shock and even the silver-rankers were startled into giving pause. The halt in their attacks gave Constance a much-needed reprieve.

The suns and moons floated up, into the air. The people they left behind were suddenly drained of colour, leaving only dark silhouettes. Flames of silver and gold lit up, limning the dark silhouettes as they began to scream.

Above them, the suns and the moons started merging together, growing and melding as they formed an enormous orb of darkness, shrouded in light to form an eclipse, floating over their heads. It loomed over the battlefield, potent and domineering in the magical darkness that filled the air. The shrieking cries of those burning in fire of silver and gold below made a horrifying accompaniment to the ominous eclipse.

The silver rankers had strong magical senses and felt the connection between the darkness that had enveloped them, the orb floating above them and the person who had called it into being. They turned as one, their gazes falling on Rufus. He was finally standing still but the cultists around him were either burning with fire or wild with panic, too busy to recognise the enemy in their midst. A construct lunged at him but he raised a hand without even looking at it, a stream of sun fire launching out and melting the steel monstrosity on the spot.

One of the three silver-rankers sneered with recognition as he locked eyes with Rufus. Rufus' face was impassive as he rose an arm to point at him, the cultist who had taken Farrah's life. From the orb above, a terrifying beam blasted down at the abomination, a bright beam with a dark core, pouring transcendent damage into the cultist.

Rufus has never come anywhere close to building up so much power with which to use this attack before. Against anything short of silver rank would have been instantly annihilated and even most silver-rankers would have died in moments. The cultist upon whom Rufus poured all his rage and all his power was no ordinary silver-ranker, however. Standing at the peak of his rank, on the cusp of obtaining gold, and with the fullness of power bestowed by its otherworldly master, the cultist was still standing when the beam was spent, the power gathered in the eclipse exhausted. It vanished, the oppressive field of darkness vanishing with it.

Across the battlefield, dozens of cultists and constructs were dead, the fires having taken their toll. The enemy that had taken the brunt of that power still stood, although anyone looking at his state might assume he wished he hadn't. The cultist had conjured one steel wall after another to try and endure the transcendent blast but it stormed through them, one after another. The cultist suffered much the same treatment, the flesh and steel of his body fused together like a candle melted by sunlight through a window.

There was an odd stillness throughout the battlefield, all eyes on the ruined cultist. He moved, just a little, then a little more. He flexing his warped limbs and melted muscles roaring in wordless pain and rage.

Rufus was as spent as his power, everything he had and more burned through to set up and deliver one grand attack. The last thing he saw before passing out, surrounded by

enemies, was the hideously injured cultist, more an abomination than ever, moving in his direction.

Chapter 190

A Question You Don't Yet Know to Ask

Jason and Humphrey were the first to rise each morning, Jason making the team breakfast while Humphrey plotted out the day's training. One of the things Emir had warned Jason about was that the houseboat would require additional materials to perform various functions, be they universal or more specific to Jason individual needs.

Jason had been finding the cloud grill a delightful new culinary tool, for which the houseboat required the addition of fire quintessence gems. Fortunately they were only iron rank, and were relatively inexpensive to source in a desert region.

Jason and Humphrey were out on the deck, Jason working hot cakes on the grill as Humphrey sat at a table, looking over the meticulous notes he was taking on the teams training. Winter was pleasant in Greenstone, with mild temperatures and less of the mugginess pressing in from the delta. The sky was a gorgeous, cloudless blue, with a crystal clarity to the air even the brightest summer day couldn't match.

"I think we'll have a nice one, today," Jason said.

"You're right," Humphrey said. "How about we do some outside training? Maybe focus on mobility training."

"Works for me," Jason said. "Did you schedule that match-up with Beth's team?"

"It won't be for a few days," Humphrey said. "We aren't the only ones in a training frenzy after the Reaper trials and the mirage chamber is heavily booked."

Like everyone who safely returned from the Reaper trials, the various Geller family teams had brought back a treasure-trove of awakening stones to complete their power sets. Danielle Geller had received the same forewarning as Jason about the chance for unusual awakening stones, thus most now had a Reaper ability in their repertoire. Many had started actively dodging Clive and his enthusiastic questions about their new powers. He had also urged Belinda to shape-shift into Jason, in an attempt to replicate his interface power, but she always ended up with his astral affinity and map powers.

"The map is a great power," Jason had insisted as Clive complained.

"Not for administrative purposes," Clive had bemoaned.

"I think you and I look at the potential of magic powers in very different ways," Jason told him.

As Humphrey and Jason chatted while going about their morning tasks, Jason spotted a familiar, but unexpected figure walking along the marina pier.

"Humphrey," Jason said. "Your ex is coming by."

“My ex?” Humphrey asked, looking up and spotting Gabrielle as she approached the houseboat.

Jason and Gabrielle had soured on one another, not the first person whose strong religious views had placed them antagonistic to Jason. His only regret, though, was the part that played in ending Humphrey’s relationship. He respected Humphrey for having the strength to end things with someone who stood out even in a world full of people made beautiful by magic. Jason doubted he could have made as mature a choice at seventeen.

Jason invited Gabrielle aboard. The open deck areas of the houseboat didn’t require the boat to take an aura imprint before granting access.

“Gabrielle,” Humphrey greeted, a complicated expression on his face.

“Hello Humphrey,” she said. Dressed in a plain version of the robes of her church, she was clearly trying to be impassive but emotion clouded her face. Steeling herself, she turned to Jason.

“The goddess has a new gift for you,” she said. “I’m here to deliver it.”

“Is it strippers?” Jason asked. “Not you; you’re too young. Other strippers, but roughly the same level of hotness.”

Humphrey and Gabrielle both gave him horrified looks.

“What?” he asked innocently.

“Ignore him,” Humphrey said.

“My lady wants me to tell you that objectification jokes are beneath you,” Gabrielle said to Jason.

“Yeah,” Jason said with a chuckle, “but you shouldn’t trust someone who doesn’t spend at least a little time in the gutter.”

“I very much disagree,” Gabrielle said.

“Colour me surprised. So what does your boss have for me? I’ll admit I’m a little trepidatious, after the last time.”

“She recognised your concerns and has prepared a new gift you should find more palatable,” Gabrielle said, clearly unhappy. “You should know that this gift edges against the boundaries of her own rules. Consideration that you clearly don’t deserve.”

“What do you mean?”

Gabrielle open the dimensional satchel and started pulling out books, one after another, piling them on the table

Next to Humphrey’s notes.

“This knowledge is the answer to a question you don’t yet know to ask,” Gabrielle said as she continued taking out books. “This pushes the limits of what she is willing to do.

Further, this knowledge is not of this world. She was reticent to give it to anyone, but you are not of this world either.”

“Not of this world?” Humphrey asked.

“The builder cultists have been bestowed knowledge from beyond this world,” Gabrielle said.

“Ah,” Jason said. “I know she likes this world to develop knowledge for itself, which is why she offered to bribe me in the first place. The Builder cult doesn’t care about that, though, and now the genie’s out of the bottle.”

“What would a genie be doing in a bottle?” Humphrey asked.

“Wait, genies are a thing?” Jason asked. “Do they grant wishes?”

“No, that would be outrageous. Do they grant wishes where you come from?”

“Just in stories,” Jason said, then turned back to Gabrielle. “So this knowledge is something that comes from the Builder?”

“Yes. Once the knowledge was known by someone in this world, it became part of the goddess. She personally transcribed these tomes for delivery to you.”

Humphrey’s eyes went wide.

“The goddess made these personally?”

“Yes,” Gabrielle confirmed as she took out a small wooden case. She opened it to reveal neat rows of recording crystals. “She also created these and the information contained within. She would have produced all these as skill books that you could absorb more quickly but knew you would reject them.”

“I would,” Jason said. “I won’t imprinting things directly into my mind that came from sources I don’t entirely trust. So, what is all this knowledge?”

“The goddess recommends you turn to your friend Clive for assistance. She anticipates he will be quite enthusiastic.”

Jason picked up a random book and opened it up. It looked to be some kind of magical theory, at a level well above what he could parse at a glance. He closed the book and sat it back down.

“Thank you,” he said. “I’m not really sure of the ramifications of this gift, but given the source, I expect it to be quite specifically useful.”

Gabrielle shook her head. “I am constantly at a loss as to why the goddess feels you warrant such consideration.”

“You and me both, sister. You want to stick around for pancakes?”

Gabrielle gave Humphrey an uncertain glance, then shook her head.

“I have further duties to attend to. I shall take my leave here.”

Rufus was stirred back to consciousness under the effect of his mother's potent healing magic. He was laying on the sandy shore of the island.

"We won, then?" he groaned.

"We were already on the way when we saw your field of darkness go up, and then that huge beam," his father said. "We finished off that silver-ranker but he was close to done when we found him."

Gabriel gave him a proud smile, placing a warm hand on Rufus' shoulder. "Fantastic job, son."

"What your father means," Arabelle said with a pointed look at Gabriel, "is that you should never have confronted an enemy like that."

"Exactly," Gabriel said. "Terrible job, son. Don't do it again."

Arabelle shook her head at her menfolk. "I think its time for another child," she said. "A daughter, this time."

"I'd love a little girl," Gabriel said. "What essence should we give her? How about a whip essence? I saw a student at the academy doing some very interesting things with one just recently."

"I think you're skipping a little far ahead, dear."

"What about the cultists?" Rufus asked.

"A lot of them made it through the portals," Callum said. Rufus hadn't even realised he was there, which was normal for Callum.

"We got most of the leadership," Callum continued. "The count came up with one silver-ranker less than my initial count, so they likely escaped."

"Prisoners?" Rufus asked.

"None," Gabriel said. "The cultists did the usual self-detonating crystal star thing. Before they did that, though, they killed off the priests amongst them."

"Killing their own allies," Arabelle said, shaking her head. "I hate fighting zealots."

"We have plenty of recordings of Purity's clergy consorting with the cultists, though," Callum said. "More than enough for the other churches to form an ecumenical council and forcibly investigate."

Rufus pushed himself to his feet.

"So, what now?" he asked.

"Now we bring in everyone else. We need to identify the dead, see if it leads us to more cultists. Give the Magic Society a chance to figure out where these portals go. As for us, we can head back to the city."

For Jason and his team, days of unrelenting training turned into weeks as potential slowly transmuted into capability. This included regular practise against other teams in the mirage chamber. Beth's team was likewise improving rapidly, beating them less than half the time but with only five members to the six on Jason's team. Padma's team was made up of Rufus' juniors from the Remore Academy and interested in testing themselves against the person Rufus had trained personally. At first, their conflicts were one sided but Jason's team advanced in leaps and bounds until they started winning as much as they lost.

Padma's team was standoffish at first, all the more when they rolled over Jason's team in their early encounters. They opened up as Jason and his team solidly proved their worth, although their draconian member remained stolid in his disdain for Humphrey and his dragon essence. Their shapeshifter, Natalie, struck up a friendship with Belinda. She was a valuable voice of experience in the specialised area of changing forms.

Padma's team leader, in the mean time, built up a rivalry with Valdis. Both were sword specialists with almost identical essence combinations, but were very different swordsmen. Valdis had the classic combination of sword, swift and adept, which produced the master confluence. Each essence was common, but with legends like Rufus' grandfather, no one would look down on it. Valdis was very much a swordsman of that tradition, with an array of special attacks that, at a glance seemed very similar. Every aspect of his combat built from and led to his mastery of the sword.

Lance, Padma's team leader, was an elf. As such, his aptitude was on spells, rather than the special attacks of a human. His essences, sword, myriad and adept, also produced the master confluence, yet produced a wholly different combat style. He could not match Valdis toe-to-toe, but he had no need to. He was far from weak in hand-to-hand but his powers gave him the freedom to fight at any range. Mixing spells into his swordsmanship, he could duplicate himself and conjure dancing blades to fight for him, firing waves of razor sharp force from a distance.

Of the two swordsmen, the more experienced Valdis edged out his opponent more often than not, although Lance would score his own points as well.

Valdis and his team maintained a perfect record against Jason's in the mirage arena, although what began as a series of thrashings slowly became actual battles. To hear Valdis talk, however, enjoying post-fight drinks on the houseboat, anyone would think he was the one losing.

“Your team is terrible to fight against,” he said to Jason. “You’re running around like an invisible, teleporting plague while your familiar is trying to burn down our healer. Normally my job is to put down problems like that, but that damn woman is made of the wind. How does an immovable object move that quickly? That’s not how immovable objects work.”

“You do realise you won, right?” Jason asked him.

“She head-butted my sword! That shouldn’t work. And what’s with that woman who’s everything? She had a wand in one hand and a shield in the other, which doesn’t seem like something people should be allowed to do.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not a rule.”

“Once she hit me with my own power. My own power! Being able to take on different roles is one thing, but none of those roles should be me!”

“Calm down,” Sigrid told him. “You’re spilling your drink.”

In the wake of reaper trials, the city had a relative flood of essences and awakening stones. The foreign adventurers largely took their gains and left but many locals had also participated. Most had never intended to vie for the ultimate prize, instead plundering the astral space for as much treasure as they could carry away and survive. As a result, the market price of essences and stones reached an all-time low.

With so many essences and awakening stones entering the market, Greenstone’s adventurer population was undergoing a surge. It made for a strong first step in replenishing the numbers diminished by the losses of the disastrous expedition.

The ramifications of the expedition were also still being felt in the ongoing presence of the Adventure Society inquiry. After beginning with sweeping demotions, they had put the branch records through a sieve in the time so many adventurers were away at the Reaper trials. Once they returned, the inquiry commenced interviews, sometime with individuals, other time with groups. Gossip buzzed as the interviews went on, discussing the questions being asked. They ranged from the individual and specific to broad ideas about the adventuring culture of the city.

Finally they had started going through reassessments, assessing which adventurers deserved rank reinstatement one by one. This brought with it a sense of hopefulness, but for most their demotions were confirmed. Those who had their membership revoked entirely did not have those decisions revisited. The lobbying to do so from certain sectors was swiftly and emphatically refused.

Other concerns were of an import that iron-rankers like Jason and his team were uninvolved, although connections kept them abreast of goings on. The Builder cult was on the back foot, at least locally. The cult had been purged from the city and, after several costly ambushes, halted their supply raids in the delta. The escapees from the island raid were still at large, however, and as stories rolled in of the cult's activities around the world, tension built as the city awaited the revelation of their next plot.

The church of Purity was under more scrutiny than any church would ordinarily have to tolerate as an ecumenical council of the other churches sanctioned them, launching a sweeping inquiry. Their temple was searched and all manner of materials seized. The church officially maintained that their members present at the island raid were a schism faction denounced by their god. Claims of a few isolated, bad apples rang hollow, however, as similar revelations were made about the church of Purity around the world.

Certain individuals stood out, either by their absence or the issues in which current events embroiled them. A number of key members of the church of Purity seemed to have vanished on 'previously-scheduled sabbaticals,' No one knew where they had gone on their 'spiritual wanderings of the soul.' This included the church of Purity's Archbishop, Nicolas Hedron, Anisa Lasalle and almost the entire Lasalle family, long deeply involved in affairs of the church. Those that remained claimed no knowledge of where their spiritual journeys had taken them.

Jason was especially delighted to hear about Lucian Lamprey scrambling to absolve himself. Lamprey's personal intervention in handing the star seed over to the church of Purity was suddenly the object of significant scrutiny.

The time-displaced priests Jason had released from the astral space were an unusual new presence in the city. Most were absorbed into their various churches, but the former members of the church of Purity were another matter. As Jason predicted, the Adventure Society had taken their disposition in hand. Given the troubles being faced by their former church, they were a rather awkward presence within the city.

While their essences were taken from them, the damage was limited while they were still iron-rank. They could never reclaim the confluence essence they gave up in favour of a divine essence, but the absence could be replaced, either by another divine essence or a regular one.

One group of the former purists dedicated themselves to regaining entry to the church of Purity. They were undaunted by the new revelations about their church, but their dedication was flatly rebuffed. A small number even turned to suicide in their despair.

Others sought positions in other churches, many finding success. The rest came to accept the need to start over and accepted new ordinary essences. With the market at record lows, the Adventure Society provided them as an act of mercy.

Whatever their situation, every member of the various faiths now escaped from the astral space had to decide on their future. They were all born before Greenstone was founded, knowing that aside from any who managed to reach gold rank, everyone they knew and loved was long gone. Many found passage to their homelands regardless, knowing that there was likely no one waiting for them or even anything they even recognised.

For those whose gods had welcomed them back, at least they had a path. Their churches situated them locally or sent them off in the direction of distant branches of their faith. Others, mostly former purists who came to accept their abandonment, decided to start over in Greenstone. They took the essences they were offered, even if they were cheap and less than ideal. For many, purist and otherwise, they rejected their former faith with ferocity. Filled with resentment at the gods who had sent them into that place, costing them everything and everyone they had known, they had a new attitude towards the gods that made Jason seem pious by comparison.

All the recovered clergy, excommunicated or not, had a variety of attitudes toward Jason. As the agent of their liberation they were largely grateful, although to wildly varying degrees. Some felt that he only released them as an afterthought or even resented him for their current situation. Many of the former purists fell into that camp. Most were more gracious, however, often appearing to thank him in person as he wandered about the Adventure Society campus.

There was even a small contingent who viewed him as their saviour, especially in the wake of the gods appearing to thank him in person. They went so far as to offer themselves into his service, which he repeatedly refused.

One day, Jason and his team returned from their training to Rufus drinking out on the deck of the houseboat with Vincent, the Adventure Society official with the outrageous moustache. The pair had previously maintained a casual relationship, although not since Farrah's death. Vincent's busy schedule and Rufus' driving obsession had left them seeing little of one another. After confronting Farrah's killer and being largely responsible for his death, Rufus was finally starting to move forward.

They were not alone, being joined by Gary and his friend Russel, an artificer from the Magic Society.

“Jason,” Vincent greeted. “Your reassessment interview with the Adventure Society has been scheduled. I thought I’d come and tell you in person.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “Any idea if I’ll be getting my old rank back?”

“The issue is that you’re very... loud for an iron-ranker,” Vincent said. “They’re going to want a display of humility.”

“No worries,” Jason. “No one’s as good at being humble as me.”