

## 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.”

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“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.

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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."