

Chapter 109: The Tyranny of Rank

The retreat was going worse than Danielle had hoped, but better than she feared. The iron rankers had been pulled back behind the bronze and silver-rankers holding the line. Luckily, the other side had only a few essence users, their number made up mostly of constructs. The artificial creatures were not the match of an equal-rank essence user, but there were so many as to make up the difference. The enemy essence users were also reluctant to risk themselves by engaging directly, which helped Danielle's attempts to pull circumstances under her control.

They were not out of danger as the enemy continued to press, but the constructs were paying for their aggression. Pushing mindlessly against the increasingly-ordered withdrawal formation, they were being rapidly ground up. They were unrelenting, however, the unliving constructs having no morale to lose. There was not a lot of open space in the rainforest, but a battle line had managed to form in the now-destroyed remains of the expedition camp, which had been cleared of trees using essence abilities. That made for a relatively open field in which the defence was holding, while the rest of the expedition retreated into the tree line.

The battlefield situation was slowly shifting. The initial attack had sown chaos and death amongst the adventurers, most of their casualties coming in those early minutes. The battle slowly started to shift as the strongest adventurers came to the fore and the expedition leadership managed to give the defences some semblance of order. Once a rough-but-definite battle line was established, the construct creatures were being ground to pieces against it.

The rescue expedition formed up in the marshalling yard. Emir gave out directions, breaking the group into an incursion team and a support team. After that, he directed one of his people, a woman named Hester, to open a portal. She traced a circle in the air which started shimmering, revealing an image of a city on the far side. Emir stepped through with only a handful of others before the portal collapsed.

Hester was the closest Jason had seen to another Asiatic person in this world. He chatted with her as they waited for her portal ability to become available again. She told him she could only open the portal to places she had previously visited, which was normal for long-range teleport abilities. The closest place to the aperture the expedition had travelled was a city to the north called Boko.

The first task of the expedition had been to return the Ustei to the northern territories in their monstrous sand barge. The city of Boko was where Adventure Society decided to return the Ustei slaves, along with any women and children that had wanted out of the tribe. Many had been seized from small communities in the region in the first place.

The time between uses for Hester's power was based on range. At the distance between Greenstone and Boko, it would be available again after an hour, one of several limitations. The more powerful the people going through the portal, the fewer people could use it before it collapsed. Hester was silver rank, but her portal ability had already reached gold. This was the only reason her portal could transmit the gold-ranked Emir at all.

Emir and the silver-rankers that had gone through first would spend the hour requisitioning vehicles from the local Magic Society branch. Everyone else would go through the second portal Hester raised, including the silver and bronze-rankers Arella had rounded up. Unlike the initial expedition, these were the best Greenstone had left to offer, the top people from every family. They were all ready to go and rescue their family members, with no shirking or hesitation among them.

The support team included Jory, a number of priests from the church of the healer, plus various other volunteers with healing abilities. Rounding out the numbers were Adventure Society functionaries and officials going along to provide general support and assistance. Unless there were a lot of afflictions going around, that would be Jason's role as well.

The defensive formation of the expedition's retreating forces was built around key people who served as anchors for the less powerful. Silver-rankers had arrayed themselves against the strongest opponents but there were not enough silver-rankers to go around. The rest of the line had to make do with groups of more powerful bronze-rankers. One such location had Farrah, Rufus and Gary working in synergy to keep the enemy at bay as other adventurers withdrew. Farrah wreaked havoc on the main mass of the enemy, while Gary and Rufus intercepted the more powerful threats trying to stop her. Farrah had conjured for herself obsidian armour that glowed with internal heat. Gary conjured something similar, made of iron, becoming an immovable bulwark. Rufus was the unstoppable force to Gary's immovable object, dancing around stalled enemies as his golden sword carved through them.

The enemy leadership had thus far remained at a secure distance, riding their strange construct mounts and hidden under hooded robes. Finally, they acted as the battlefield conditions started to shift. They simultaneously leapt into the fray, striking out at

crucial points in the defensive line. The enemy leaders were all bronze and silver-rankers and their intervention pressured several critical points in the line.

A figure covered in robes moved on Farrah. Rufus saw it coming, gesturing at Gary and they rushed to intercept. It had a silver rank aura and its robes were filled with a strange bulk. Its movements were strange, its arms hanging limply at its sides. It lunged forward with a kick, Gary stepping up to intervene. He had a huge hammer in one hand and a shield in the other, which he raised in front of him.

Expertly, Gary angled his shield to deflected most of the kick's force. In spite of his huge strength, he was still sent stumbling backwards with a large dent in his shield. Gary's speed and strength were at the very peak of what a bronze-ranker could achieve, being the equal of most low-ranker silvers. Their enemy was as high in silver as Gary and Rufus were in bronze, so even Gary was heavily overmatched.

Rufus moved in to attack, quickly recognising that the arms hanging at its sides seemed to be crippled. It fought with kicks alone, moving and spinning with a speed bordering on gold-rank. Kicks alone were not an efficient means of fighting, however, and as Gary came back to the fore they teamed up to attack.

As they battled the silver-ranker, Farrah was hard at work holding the line. The adventurers around them were bronze and not as strong as her and her companions. They did not make up for holding the line in place of Gary and Rufus, giving the pair a wide berth as they battled the silver.

The robed enemy was being pushed by Gary and Rufus, largely due to using neither essence abilities nor its arms. Their attacks seemed to have little impact, however, as the bulk in the robes was apparently due to some kind of armour. It seemed to shrug off every attack that landed.

There was a brief balance, Gary and Rufus with all their abilities against the robed figure that only kicked. That balance was abruptly broken with a powerful kick getting past Gary's shield and landing square on the torso of his heavy armour. The armour deformed into his chest as he was sent tumbling across the ground, ribs shattered. Only his bronze-rank toughness as his heavy armour kept his alive, but he wasn't getting back up.

When their turn came, Jason and Jory walked up to the portal. They glanced at each other and stepped through. There was a rushing sensation that came with moving through the portal that felt just like his teleport ability. After they emerged, Jory staggered off and fell to his knees, throwing up. Looking around, Jason saw that Jory wasn't alone; many people had been unsettled by it. Jason noticed others that, like him, were unaffected, and

most of them were members of the celestine race. He remembered that his astral affinity racial gift was one he shared with celestines, which apparently gave a tolerance for teleporting.

The city of Boko reminded Jason of Old City, with plenty of desert stone in evidence. The air was drier here, without the proximity of the delta and the ocean; just breathing was drying out his mouth. He didn't have time to look around though, as there was work to be done. Emir had used his hour head start effectively, leaving sand skimmers waiting to carry them into the desert.

Rufus was now facing the silver-ranker alone. He didn't have Gary's reflexes but his skill was a level above their enemy. The robed figure followed the kick to Gary with one aimed at Rufus, who read the move in time to narrowly avoid it.

Rufus used his speed of light power, one of his strongest trump cards. Everything appeared to freeze around him, even his incredibly fast enemy. In this brief moment of grace, he lashed out multiple times against the robed figure. Even with his enemy at a standstill, Rufus' golden sword had little impact on the armour hidden under the enemy's bulky robes. Even a strike straight to the head bounced off, eerily without a clang in the time outside of time. His power lasted only a scant pair of seconds, Rufus inwardly cursing as it was wasted on cutting holes in the enemy's robe.

Time started moving at normal speed once again. The robes were torn and burned by Rufus' glowing golden sword, the rents revealing some kind of metal underneath. The remains of the robes were suddenly shredded as something burst from within, giving Rufus his first look at his attacker's true form.

The protection Rufus' blade had struck was not external armour, but metal grafted directly into flesh. Steel pushed into skin, heavy bolts using bones for anchor points. It was an abomination of living tissue and cold steel; even its head had plates bolted into the skull. Barely any flesh was visible under all the metal, just the jaw and some patches around the joints. There wasn't even enough living flesh to tell if it was a man or a woman.

There were four, wholly artificial arms emerging from its back. Long and inhuman, they were articulated at multiple points and were crafted from razor-sharp metal. They ended in oversized hands, each finger tapered to a point like a cluster of spearheads. The arms had been wrapped around the enemy's body, the source of the bulk under its robes. It was releasing these arms that had torn the robes asunder. The enemy's natural arms continued to hang limply as their metal equivalents flexed powerfully before stabbing out like spears.

Rank for rank, the only person who could match Rufus' skill on the battlefield was possibly Danielle Geller. Rufus' enemy certainly couldn't, but they were not rank for rank. Now the enemy had given up on hiding its true form, its speed and strength were backed up by powerful abilities and its uncanny metal arms. Rufus' skill allowed him to barely hold on in the face of a suddenly more powerful enemy but every moment was a desperate scramble to stay alive.

It was a clash of unsurpassed skill and overwhelming power. Perfectly executed attacks met defences that were no more than adequate, but so powerful that they were up to the task, regardless. What little damage Rufus manage to inflict was quickly guarded by a conjured metal shield. It only occupied one arm, leaving three to attack. The enemy's other abilities could rapidly repair the grafted armour, or even heal when Rufus' blade dug into flesh.

Like most humans, many of Rufus' abilities were special attacks. He used all his skills to maximise their effectiveness, every trick he had. Feinting to land an attack on a blind spot; moving to expose a weakness. The unprecedented threat drew out every scrap of capability. If their advancement as essence users were closer, the bizarre foe would have been utterly outclassed but this was not the case. There was no escaping the tyranny of rank.

As Rufus chained each attack into the next, the enemy was counterattacking. Its essence powers allowed it to transmute the arms into other forms, allowing for its own special attacks. It began by changing them into lance-like weapons for simple but powerful attacks. Rufus was able to predict the linear attacks and effectively dodge. It changed to ball-and-chain weapons but Rufus likewise anticipated their movement. Their weakness was the recovery time after attacks, which Rufus baited out before ducking out of range, then came back to counter.

The enemy changed tack again, moving back itself when Rufus was pulling away. Its arms became needle launchers spitting streams of tiny but deadly needles at him and forcing him to close in again. As he did, the arms became razor whips that slashed about wildly. They weren't as powerful at the ball and chain weapons but were relentless and unpredictable.

Every moment of the battle, Rufus was running on a knife-edge. Even glancing blows from his more powerful enemy meant serious damage and he was being ravaged by the increasingly tricky attacks. He was forced to stay close or even more needles would pincushion him, but that left him open to the lacerating whips, now dripping with his blood.

It was the ground under his feet that finally betrayed him. The rainforest of the astral space was full of wet ground, churned into mud by first the expedition camp and then the battle. Rufus slipped, just slightly but he had been fighting with no margin of error. A metal arm transformed into a blade and slashed upwards, and severing Rufus' sword arm. Stumbling in shock, Rufus was done. Another kick launched him away like Gary, but even in that state, his training-honed instincts kicked in. He threw himself to cushion the blow, which saved his life but only barely. Crippled and near dead, he was sent tumbling helplessly through the mud.