

## 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.”

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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."

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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.”

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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.”