

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.