

## Chapter 614

### The Only Wound You Can Truly Suffer

Jason's commandeering of the arena's public address system had broken the tension between Rufus and his opponent, Glenn Twenhey. After they saw Jason escorted off, however, they went right back to staring at one another. It was more than just assessing the other by physique, clothing and body language. Their auras were clashing like fencers, each seeking an opening that would make for an advantage as the fight began, or even uncovered a little extra information that could be the difference between victory and defeat.

"I should have moved when your friend provided the distraction," Glenn said.

"Wouldn't have helped," Rufus said. "And I'm sorry for what's about to happen. But you knew who my grandfather was when you picked me as an opponent, did you not?"

"I did. Hector tried to talk me out of it, but I insisted."

Rufus nodded.

"I know that feeling," Rufus said. "The need to prove yourself, only to be dismantled by an opponent you underestimated."

"Who says I'm underestimating you?"

Instead of answering, Rufus used his speed accelerating power and everything seemed to freeze as his subjective time stream outpaced the world around him. He used that time to close the distance between them, leaving a trail of light behind him. Time unfroze and he smashed Glenn with a head butt, having never raised his golden sword. Glenn realised that Rufus had burned a long cooldown power to effectively just flex, as a head butt was nothing to a silver ranker. The simple surprise of it had staggered him more than the damage.

Glenn activated his own time accelerating power, but he didn't need it to close the gap, since Rufus had done it for him. Rufus seemed to freeze, standing with his silver sword at his side, and Glenn used a trick just like Sophie's. Attacks made during the accelerated time-stream would be all but harmless, so he generated a large number of blade wave projectiles which were ready to launch as soon as normal time resumed. It was only as the acceleration was about to end that he noticed a problem.

"Wait, *silver* sword?"

Rufus had the eclipse confluence essence. It informed the way he fought both with specific powers, like the gold and silver swords he could conjure, along with the general theme of his combat style. He shifted between three combat modes based on the sun, the moon and the eclipse. The sun state was built around speed and offensive ability, while

the moon was about elusiveness and stealth. The eclipse state offered powerful but short-term buffs or powerful finishers.

Each state was a combination of how he fought, the way he moved and the powers he used, some of which offered different advantages, depending on which state he was in.

His *Light of the Sun, Shadow of the Moon* ability was one of several that offered different effects based on his current state. In the moon state, it could make him intangible for a brief moment. When Glenn's mass of blade waves shot into Rufus, they passed right through him. The intangibility only lasted a few seconds, but Rufus triggered it right before Glenn had slowed time, guaranteeing it would be up when Glenn's ability ended and his attack launched.

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"That was nicely done," the Storm King observed. "Luck?"

"Hardly," Soramir said. "The swift essence is a favourite amongst skill-focused melee adventurers. Personal time-acceleration powers are very common, even when not hunting for them with specific awakening stones. Even magic swordsmen who go for other essences get them. The Remore boy gets his from the light essence."

"And I get mine from lightning," the king said. "You're saying that Remore predicted both that his enemy would have that ability, and that he would use it in that moment."

"Yes."

"Then it was luck. He could have easily been wrong."

"Yes, but his odds were not as bad as they seem. This is a battle for reputation. By burning one of his most powerful abilities to make an attack that was nothing more than a statement, Remore was baiting his opponent. It began when they spoke before they fought. Then Remore disregarded Twenhey with his opening move. He was essentially telling his opponent that he could throw away key abilities and still win."

"I see," the king said with a nod. "Twenhey wanted to show up Remore by using the same ability to show him – and all of us – that he deserved to be taken seriously. Especially by the grandson of the man who stands as the pinnacle of Twenhey's essence combination."

"Exactly," Soramir said. "Instead, he was outplayed again, which appears to have set a tone."

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Glenn was a human and his ability set was reflective of that. His power set was very high on offensive abilities, particularly special attacks. This fit very nicely into the Rimaros adventurer ethos of ultra-specialisation, as he was a pure striker. Having so many

aggressive options at his disposal meant that he could tailor the approach of his offence to the enemy he was facing. If one approach didn't work, he could pivot to another. What he had never previously encountered was a situation where none of his approaches worked.

The advantage of using one of the most common and well-researched essence combinations on the planet was that it was easy to optimise. Strategies to develop more specific power sets and synergies were more readily available. Tailoring a power set was never a perfectly reliable endeavour, but with a common combination made up of common-rarity essences, it was more reliable than most.

The disadvantage of this approach was that it had the weaknesses of its strengths. An opponent who was familiar with these strategies and techniques would, sight unseen, have a solid grasp of at least the general approaches such an essence user would take.

Rufus talked a lot about how his family ran a school, but Jason had never understood the totality of what that meant, or why it was such a source of pride. The Remore Academy studied adventurer methodology from across the globe. This helped them to educate students that came from around the world, as well as prepare their students for what they would encounter in their travels.

Remore academy students were scions of international mercantile guilds, famous adventuring families, aristocrats and even royalty. The academy prided itself on preparing those students for whatever they might face. That could be a tricky diplomatic situation in a palace, a grim assassination attempt on a remote roadway or a pitched battle against sky pirates.

Rufus was more than just the beneficiary of the teachings of his family's academy. He had seen all kinds of adventurers from when he was old enough to be carried around by his father. Most importantly for his current situation was that Rufus had been trained in swordsmanship personally by the greatest swordsman in the world.

Glenn was exceptionally skilled. His proficiency was not just with sword technique and his essence abilities, but using them in conjunction for results greater than either would achieve alone. His efficiency was tight and his tactics were built on centuries of refinement, passed down by the masters of history. It wasn't enough. Every tactic Glenn used, every ability he pulled out, was not just something that Rufus had seen, but also practised against extensively. Rufus knew the methods of sword masters and he knew how to counter them.

Glenn was very good and deserving of his place in a prestigious guild, but the more they clashed, the less Rufus saw him as an opponent. Glenn, in Rufus' eyes, increasingly

became a collection of flaws in need of correction. Since his family ran a school Rufus did what he knew: he put on a class.

Using his sun state, Rufus applied pressure on Glenn, baiting out techniques and provoking counters that he dismantled one by one. When Glenn shot blade waves that tracked their opponent, Rufus shifted to a moon state where he couldn't be tracked. The blades shot forward blindly, hitting walls or the floor. When Glenn incorporated special attacks into his swordsmanship, Rufus spotted the indicators and dodged, blocked or countered as appropriate.

Glenn grew increasingly frustrated as his tactics were pulled apart in front of the high society of Rimaros. Guild masters and the heads of noble houses were watching as Rufus disassembled his abilities like a watchmaker taking apart a faulty timepiece. He was on the greatest stage in his life, only for every aspect of his prowess as an adventurer to be pulled out and found wanting.

As a final, desperate stratagem, Glenn drew back from Rufus and paused.

"Would you be willing to try something a little different?" Glenn asked.

"I've been waiting for something even a little different this entire fight," Rufus told him.

Glenn sheathed his sword, untied the dimensional pouch bound tightly to his potion belt to avoid it flapping around, and pulled out two collars. They were comfortably padded, but still plainly suppression collars.

"Pure swordsmanship," Glenn said. "No powers. How good you are against how good I am."

Rufus blinked in surprise.

"I will say this," he said. "That is the first time since we walked out here that you've done something that I truly did not anticipate."

Rufus held out his hand and Glenn tossed him a collar. Rufus opened his own dimensional pouch and took out a sword, since he would be unable to use his conjured ones. It was a scimitar, but very plain compared to those he could create through magic.

"If you want something better, I can loan you one."

"This sword was crafted especially for me with care, by my best friend in the world. You don't have anything better."

"Friendship is all well and good, Mr Remore, but you shouldn't let it blind you to the fact that your friend is a worthless smith."

Rufus smiled.

"My grandfather has given me all manner of good advice over the course of my life," he said. "For example, he once told me that if someone provokes you, then let them. But

instead of getting angry and letting it cloud your judgement, let it take away your mercy as you calmly take them apart. I was only going to take this so far, Young Master Twenhey, but now I find myself short on mercy.”

Glenn smiled back as he clipped on his suppression collar and Rufus did the same.

“Just so you know, Mr Remore, my sword instructor studied at your academy. He was trained personally by your grandfather and spent decades developing counters to his fighting style.”

“Would that be Ayer Wick you're referring to?” Rufus asked, eliciting a surprised expression from Glenn.

“You know of him?”

“It was a guess. A lot of people develop counters to my grandfather's style, and Wick is about right in terms of age and location. My grandfather rather enjoys that they do, since it's hard to refine his style as the centuries roll on. He showed me the counters your sword instructor developed. They were okay. I saw you trying them in our earlier clashes, which was why I was so surprised you chose this path.”

“That was with powers mixed in,” Glenn said. “We'll see how you do when all you have is technique.”

“Yes,” Rufus agreed, his eyes glancing over the audience. “I'm going to make a point of it.”

He raised his scimitar.

“With this sword.”

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Jason had become very, very good with the sword. Rufus had helped him to take the skill books containing the Way of the Reaper and make the technique his own. After the incredible number of battles Jason had been through, wild and desperate and strange, experience had truly allowed him to become a master of the sword.

Technique to technique, Glenn would have beaten Jason. Jason was an adventurer, not a duellist, and his combat style intricately blended his skills and powers to the point that removing one would severely impede the other. Glenn's strategy of removing powers from the equation would have gotten him a win against Jason without question.

Rufus was not Jason. There was a reason that Rufus was seen as the future of the Remore family. They knew talent and had nurtured his, with training and opportunities they carefully engineered so that he would see success and failure both. When he went his own way, Rufus had setbacks.

Although they didn't push their expectations on him, Rufus knew his family anticipated great things. Responsibility weighed heavily on him, and the loss of Farrah and Jason had somewhat derailed him. But the life of an adventurer was long and his family was patient. They did not interfere as he turned to teaching over adventuring. Only his mother stepped in, and even she was a light hand.

The return of Jason and Farrah brought with it a slow change in Rufus. He wasn't sure what his future held, be it teaching or adventuring, both or neither, but he knew one thing: he wasn't letting his friends down again. During his time in Rimaros, Rufus had taken the fundamentals of training he taught Jason and followed them with relentless determination. He honed his skills, pushed his body and took contract after contract, which the monster surge offered in plentiful supply.

The weight of what Rufus had been through was different to what Glenn had done. He was not dissimilar to Rufus if he had never left Vitesse; never felt true desperation and never felt the consequences of abject failure. The pride and ambition that drove him was a gentle breeze before the raging gale of Rufus' determination.

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"What's he doing?" Clive asked. "Why doesn't he finish it?"

"I don't know what you call it here, if you have even have the practice in any of this world's cultures," Jason said. "Where I come from, it's usually known as counting coup. You touch the enemy without harming them, to prove that you could have beaten them. It's a way to gather prestige or humiliate an enemy into accepting defeat. Rufus was making a show of how much better he was than this guy, but I think slagging off your sword pushed him over the line, Gary."

"Good," Gary said. "There's nothing wrong with a good, plain, reliable weapon. You don't have to make it all fancy."

Jason glanced down at the scabbard on his hip.

"That one is your fault," Gary said, following Jason's gaze. "Your soul bond made it go weird."

"Making things go weird is kind of my thing," Jason said, prompting agreeing nods all around.

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"I yield," a crestfallen Glenn said.

"I haven't even touched you with the edge of my sword," Rufus said. "You're going to quit without a scratch on you?"

"You didn't have to do it this way," Glenn told him.

“You’re not going to fight on? What about the pride of your guild? Of your sword instructor? Of your house? Are you going to throw it all on the ground?”

“Why are you doing this?” Glenn asked, his voice pleading.

“We didn’t ask for this,” Rufus shot back coldly. “I didn’t bring us here. Hector de Varco’s challenge turned us into a whetstone for his house and guild to hone their reputation. Defeating you wouldn’t hurt you. Humiliation is the only wound you can truly suffer. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to go have my sword repaired.”

Rufus held up his blade, peering as he inspected it for nicks and dents.

“Oh. It looks like I don’t have to.”

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Jason and his companions were waiting, sitting around calmly as Rufus returned to the viewing box.

“That was awesome,” Travis said. “I know we haven’t known each other very long, but you totally educated that guy. And Jason was telling me your whole family fights like that? You should open a school.”

Rufus frowned in confusion.

“My family does run a school,” he said. “I thought I told you tha...”

He trailed off as Travis took a shot glass from the dimensional bag at his waist. Everyone else in the room but Rufus himself did the same and drained their glasses. Rufus took on an aggrieved expression, his eyes landing on Arabelle and the empty glass in her hand.

“Mum, you too?”