

Chapter 131: What the Geller Name is Worth

Rick led Clive and Belinda through the grounds. Clive and Belinda were both enraptured as Rick took them through pathways off the main thoroughfares, the visitors rapidly talking.

“See that flowering vine?” Clive asked, pointing it out to Belinda. “See the way they have it growing over the bamboo frame?”

“That’s floating ghost flower, right?” Belinda asked.

“Good eye,” Clive said.

“I know a guy who grows it.”

“A herbalist or apothecary?”

“He’s more of a recreational enthusiast.”

Clive stopped under an archway covered in the flowering vine, making sweeping gestures with his arms.

“If you could see magic you’d be able to spot the subtle impact it has on the ambient magic over the whole estate. Whoever designed this whole place was a genius. The foresight to wait for plants to grow over decades, planning out the shifts in magic as plants and trees grew. Adapting for seasonal changes, different stages of growth.”

“I can’t imagine planning that out over the whole space,” Belinda said. “This estate is bigger than an entire district in Old City.”

“We should probably keep moving,” Rick prompted. His cousin, Henry, was the team magic expert and had been similarly impressed by the grounds when they first arrived. Now Henry’s ashes had been mixed into the soil.

They spotted the dome of the mirage chamber, well before they reached the annexed buildings attached to it. Rick unlocked the control room to the mirage chamber and led them inside. Light from the glass ceiling lit up the interior, showing the wooden platforms lining the sides of the room and the waist-high stone block under the wide window that crossed the entire back wall. The interior of the dome beyond was dark.

Clive immediately began explaining things to Belinda, who had never seen anything from this branch of magic. “These wooden platforms are the interface,” he explained. “It projects your senses into an illusionary self that can interact with other generated illusions in the dome, on the other side of that window.”

He walked up to the stone block. It was heavy and grey, with a wild mess of runes and sigils carved into it.

“These are the controls,” Clive said. “It’s a lot more impressive when the chamber is active, which you’ll see later.”

Clive pointed out a small hole on the side of the block.

“That’s where you feed the crystals containing the various things to be replicated under the dome,” he explained. “The chamber’s current configuration is fine to generate some environments with some monsters in them. It’s a bit basic to handle what we brought along, though. Still, just building a mirage chamber in an area of such low magical density was incredibly impressive, especially for the time they did it. Only a fraction of what is now Old City had even been constructed. Even now, the important part – the dome – is more than capable of doing what we need. We just need to upgrade the control system so it can tell the dome to do it.”

Clive turned to look at Rick.

“Your forebears were formidable people, Rick. You have every right to be proud of what your family has accomplished.”

Rick nodded absently, glancing at the door.

“That legacy comes with a responsibility,” he said morosely. “One we pay in blood to uphold.”

Clive paused what he was doing to give Rick a long look.

“I’ve actually been here in the estate before,” Clive said. “My first monster surge was the one before last. when I was a boy. My family are eel farmers here in the delta and it was your family that took us in and sheltered us, along with countless others.”

He walked over to Rick and put a hand on his shoulder.

“This is Greenstone,” Clive said. “We know what the Geller name is worth. If you ever need anything, you ask. Everyone in the delta knows that we’ve asked plenty, and your family answered every time.”

Rick steeled his face to mask his emotions and Clive gave him a big smile, patting his shoulder before leaving him be.

“Time to gets started,” Clive said as he began pulling crates from his storage space, leaving Belinda to organise them neatly and crack them open with a pry tool.

“You don’t have a dimensional storage space,” Clive said, looking the small but effective crowbar. “Where were you keeping that?”

“Tricks of the trade,” Belinda said. “You always have to be ready.”

“You’re full of surprises, aren’t you?”

“You have no idea.”

After taking out the last box and leaving them to Belinda, Clive glanced back at Rick, then to the stone block.

“Now, Rick,” Clive said. “You see that line running around the side of the stone block, near the top?”

“Yeah,” Rick said.

“That line is where the whole top section of the block comes off as a slab, to access the inside. I'm going to unseal it and I'll need you to lift that slab off and put it out of the way. Is that something you can manage? ”

“That's a hefty bit of stone but I'll sort it out,” Rick said.

Clive used a magic wand to trace around the outside of the block, along the line he had just pointed out. Rick then hauled off the rune-covered top, revealing the block as a large stone box. The inside was covered in runes, and fitted with different components. Stone tablets, also rune-covered, were slotted vertically into the bottom, as were crystals like sculpted icicles. Unlike the control panel, magical glows traced out lines and shone from the crystals, spraying rainbow colours into the room.

“Where are all the crystals?” Rick asked. “The ones you put in the side to add new monsters.”

“Like this?” Clive asked, taking out a crystal. It was a finger-sized length of faceted crystal.

“Yeah,” Rick said. “I've seen a bunch of them put in.”

“These are highly specialised, artificial manifestations of raw magic,” Clive explained. “Sort of like very complicated spirit coins, if you like. When you feed them in the intake on the side they vanish, like when you eat a spirit coin.”

“So they don't just pile up inside, then?” Rick asked.

“No, which is good. We'll need to add quite a few once the upgrade is up and working.”

“How many is quite a few?”

“Four thousand and ninety-six,” Clive said.

“Seriously?”

“Take a look at those crates,” Clive said. “Most of them are filled with padded racks of crystals.”

Clive took a simple table from his storage space, then draped a plain, heavy cloth over it. He laid out a series of magical tools, from wedge-shaped stones to crystal orbs with silver stands to stop them from rolling away. There was a slew of magic wands, varied in length, material and shape. Many were curved or kinked; one was bent into a spiral

halfway down its length. Clive got to work, explaining what he was doing to Belinda as he went.

“I’m going to wait outside,” Rick said. “I’ll be just out the door if you need anything.”

“Thank you,” Clive said absently, not looking up from his work. Bent over into the stone box he called on Belinda to hand him various tools. Belinda peppered him with questions as she handed him each new tool, peering in at what he was doing while he explained what he was doing at each step. One after another, the magical lights went out as he worked. Once the glow was completely faded, he started carefully removing parts.

After setting them aside, he had Belinda start handing him replacement parts from the boxes they had brought. He changed the runes inside the box, his tools reworking the hard stone like the softest clay. He slotted-in new tablets and crystals, replacing almost everything inside. Finally, he chose a few of the components he had removed, and after checking them over, put them back into place. The discarded parts he had Belinda crate up for the Gellers to do with whatever they wanted.

Finally, Clive began reactivating the magic of the control system, fastidiously testing his work carefully as the rainbow light once again started shining from within.

“This all looks good,” Clive said. “I’ll rework the control slab a bit and we can do some final testing. Fetch Rick, would you please? I’ll need him to reorient the slab as I work with it.”

Clive modified both sides of the lid of the stone box, altering the mirage chamber controls. He had the lid replaced and started running tests on the mirage chamber functionality. They watched through the window as wild patterns lit up the space under the dome. There were several problems, requiring the slab to be taken off and put back on again multiple times as Clive made adjustments and tested again.

Under the dome, on the other side of the viewing window, images flickered in and out. Monsters randomly appeared with odd colours or strangely warped bodies. The most bizarre was a heidel with duck legs, both its heads having been replaced with Rick’s.

“Oh, that’s not right,” Rick said.

“You must use the chamber a lot if your head is the one that popped out,” Clive said. He methodically tackled each problem, testing and retesting as he worked through every incompatibility and adjusted every miscalibration. Finally, everything was in working order.

“Thank you,” Clive said to Rick. “You’ve made this so much easier. Or possible at all, in fact. I doubt I could even move that lid, let alone lift it.”

“My cousin would have loved this,” Rick said. “Getting into the guts of that thing.”

“The expedition?” Clive asked gently and Rick nodded.

“Will this help us find the people who we fought there?” Rick asked. “The ones who...”

Rick’s voice failed him as he remembered the blank look his friend had given him just hours ago.

“That’s the idea,” Clive said darkly. “We’re looking for something that will let us hunt them down.”

Rick nodded, eyes clear and focused.

“What else can I do to help?”

“Grab that first crate of crystals,” Clive said. “We have a lot to shove in there.”

Chapter 132:

Cleansed

“That should be the nest in there,” Humphrey said. They were on a wide embankment road, running through a stretch of wetlands. The largest portion of high ground had a sizeable stand of trees, in which they had been informed were the trap weavers.

Humphrey and Sophie looked at Jason, who still had bags under his bloodshot eyes. His gaze focused on the trees and Sophie noticed a shift in his posture. The confident, laconic, half-slouch became more upright, his feet ready to move. There was a sudden readiness that her own instincts recognised as a preparedness to fight.

“Use a recording crystal,” Humphrey said. “Give her something to watch later.

He nodded, taking out his carousel stand of recording crystals and picking one out before returning the carousel to his inventory. He tossed the crystal over his head as his magical cloak formed around him. He ran to the edge of the embankment and leapt off, cloak floating around him as he drifted lightly down to land on the surface of the water like it was solid ground. Moving forward, he disappeared into the trees.

➤ **Objective: eliminate [Trap Weavers] 1/14.**

“That was quick,” Sophie said.

“Jason has abilities and equipment well suited to fighting trap weavers,” Humphrey said. “Most of us find them troubling at best and deadly at worst. More iron-rankers in Greenstone die to trap weavers than anything else.”

Jason held his conjured dagger in a back-handed grip. Emerging from a shadow he stabbed out to his side, pinning a spider to the tree it was gripping. The spider’s body was around the size of a human torso, spewing out gore as the knife plunged through it.

➤ **Objective: eliminate [Trap Weavers] 2/14.**
➤ **You have defeated [Trap Weaver].**
➤ **Would you like to loot [Trap Weaver]?**

Jason yanked the knife free and the trap weaver splashed into the water. He walked over the surface of the water, unconcerned. Roots jutted from the water but his perception power let him easily pick them out in the darkness. A thick strand of webbing shot out and latched onto his cloak, immediately trying to pull on it. That section of cloak became

incorporeal and the strand fell limp as Jason drew a throwing dart from the bandolier on his chest and flung it toward the other end of the strand. The dart had a red cord, marking it as explosive. Chunks of trap weaver belched out of the darkness with a loud bang.

- Objective: eliminate [Trap Weavers] 3/14.
-

Jason walked over to a gobbet of flesh that had struck a tree and poked it.

- You have defeated [Trap Weaver].
 - Would you like to loot [Trap Weaver]?
-

One of the functions of Jason's hood was that he could see right through it, not obstructing his vision. He could see trap weavers all around him, crawling on trees and believing themselves hidden in the dark. They were shades of grey, like Jason's armour, which had been crafted from their leather. Their legs ended in the sharp tips that dug into bark, which made them excellent tree climbers. Those legs were also powerful and springy, allowing them to leapt between trees or onto prey.

One of the spider leapt at Jason from the left. He reached out and grabbed it out of the air, gripping it by the head. It bit into his hand as its sharp legs tried to stab his arm, but skittered off his armour.

- [Trap Weaver] has inflicted [Trap Weaver Venom] on you.
 - You have resisted [Trap Weaver Venom].
 - [Trap Weaver Venom] does not take effect.
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
-

He crushed the spider's head in his fist and dropped it into the water.

- Objective: eliminate [Trap Weavers] 4/14.
 - You have defeated [Trap Weaver].
 - Would you like to loot [Trap Weaver]?
-

From multiple directions, strands shot out at him. Some ineffectually struck his cloak, others slid off his armour without achieving purchase.

Item: [Trap Weaver Battle Robe] (iron rank, epic)

*A full body armour, carefully hand-crafted from the silk and leather of trap weavers.
(armour, cloth/leather).*

- Effect: Increased resistance to damage. Highly effective against cutting and piercing damage, less effective against blunt damage.
- Effect: Repairs damage over time. Extensive damage may require external repair.
- Effect: Absorbs blood to prevent leaving a blood trail.
- Effect: Increases resistance to bleed and poison effects.
- Effect: Resistant to adhesive substances and abilities with adhesive effects.
- Effect: Adapts fit to the wearer, within a certain range.

Jason stood in the middle of the trap weaver encirclement. The monsters milled about, confused by their ineffectual attacks. In the shadowy copse of trees, Jason could teleport almost however he willed. He panned his gaze around, mapping out the shadows and the positions of the trap weavers. As the monsters launched a second barrage of webs, he vanished and went to work.

Humphrey and Sophie awaited Jason's return.

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- Objective: eliminate [Trap Weavers] 5/14.
 - Objective: eliminate [Trap Weavers] 6/14.
 - Objective: eliminate [Trap Weavers] 7/14.

"He really isn't messing about," Sophie said.

"Everyone has their own way of fighting," Humphrey said. "With most monsters, I have an easier time than Jason but trap weavers are a bad match for me. I'm most effective against enemies that stand their ground in open space. Complex, shadowy environments are where trap weavers nest but that's where Jason thrives. Over time, you'll come to find what works best for you. As you pick up more abilities and get more experience, you'll refine your style."

Quest: [Notice: Trap Weavers]

- Objective complete: Eliminate [Trap Weavers] 14/14.
 - Quest complete.
-

Sophie looked up, but no bag of coins appeared.

“No rewards if we didn’t contribute,” Humphrey said. “I can see the bag dropping on you becoming annoying.”

“Getting tired of money literally falling out of the sky is a problem I’ll be happy to have.”

They spotted rainbow smoke drifting up from the top of the trees as Jason emerged. Once he reached them he dropped his cloak, revealing a large amount of blood on his head. The monster blood had vanished into smoke, making what remained come from his own injuries.

“Are you alright?” Humphrey asked.

“No worries,” Jason said. “I healed up using my abilities.”

“Did one of them bite you on the head?” Humphrey asked.

“Uh... yep. That was it.”

“What really happened?” She asked.

“Like Humphrey said,” Jason told her. “I got bitten by a monster.”

“I hope you won’t be cutting me out of too many fights,” Sophie said. “I like getting paid. Not that it feels that way, with you storing all the money.”

“Don’t worry,” Jason said. “My storage space keeps all the money together, but I’m keeping track of how much is yours.”

“And I can trust you to keep the numbers straight?” she asked.

“You still don’t trust me?” Jason asked.

“If our positions were swapped,” she said, “I would absolutely be stealing from you.” Jason chuckled.

“You’re his indentured servitor,” Humphrey pointed out. “All the work you do is for him and he is entitled to take any or all of what you earn as he likes. He doesn’t need to steal from you because he can take it all with complete legality. He doesn’t have to do any more than feed you.”

“Don’t worry,” Jason said. “I’ll keep proper track. You have to pay for your own gear, though.”

He took out a bottle of crystal wash and tipped it over his head.

“That means both equipment and consumables,” he added.

She gave him a flat look.

“What?” he asked her.

“Why would you lie and claim you were bitten on the head?” she asked.

“I’m not lying,” Jason said. “I definitely didn’t get woozy after the fight from teleporting too much while hungover and hit my head on a log.”

The procession of people who entered the ritual room was as prestigious a gathering as to be found in Greenstone. Danielle Geller, Thalia Mercer, Elspeth Arella, Emir Bahadir and the archbishop of the church of purity, Nicolas Hendren. Ernest Geller was waiting inside, playing guard to Jonah Geller. Jonah, his upper arm firmly in Ernest’s grip, glared at each person as they entered. When the Archbishop entered, Jonah’s eyes went wide and he strained to yank his arm free of Ernest’s grasp. It didn’t budge in the grip of Ernest’s bronze-rank strength.

Elspeth Arella used her aura to brutally suppress Jonah’s. Many powerful constriction abilities could only affect those whose auras had been beaten down, like the ability she used to entrap Jonah in a bubble of force. It cut off his protestations and lifted him helplessly into the air.

“Thank you, Madam Director,” the Archbishop said. “If you could move him away from the centre of the room, that would be appreciated.”

Jonah’s bubble floated away as his fists hammered at the inside. His mouth was visibly firing off invective but his voice was as confined as his body. The Archbishop took a white bag from the satchel at his side and removed the stopper from a spout in the bag’s corner. From it, he started carefully pouring out a mixture of powdered silver and gold to form a ritual circle.

“Fortunately,” he said, “divine rituals are not so vulnerable to vagaries of ambient magic as the mundane varieties.”

“I’ve never seen one performed before,” Arella said.

“They are much as ordinary rituals,” the Archbishop said. “They still draw on the power of ambient magic but are infused with the glorious might of the divine. My god’s will moves the magic and not the other way around, which is why your ability entrapping the unfortunate boy will not affect it.”

After drawing out the magical diagram, the Archbishop went around placing materials within it. Silver rank spirit coins were the bulk of the materials, while most of the others were orbs of gold or crystal, set out in small frames like silver egg-cups. When he was done, he stepped back, held out a hand and started chanting.

“God most pure, I beseech. Make in this place a sanctuary most clean, to suppress that which poisons the stem and reveal that which poisons the root. In this circle, let no rot spread nor foreign taint take action. Let all be made pure and clean.”

White and gold light started shining up from the circle.

“You may deposit the man in the circle, Madam Director,” the Archbishop said.

The bubble floated toward the circle with Jonah, trapped inside, still furiously thrashing about. His hands and head were bloodied from where had pounded them against the enclosure. As it entered the light, the bubble rapidly dissolved, like butter melting in the sun. Jonah fell out but instead of collapsing to the floor, drifted through the air to float above the centre of the magic circle. His arms and legs were pulled out to his sides, his whole body jerking in a small seizure. His eyes were wide and rapidly turning bloodshot, his jaw clenched tight.

“Jonah,” Danielle whispered, her voice wracked with misery as she looked on. Thalia Mercer placed a comforting hand on her shoulder, her own troubled gaze locked on the young man in the circle.

Jonah’s eyes rolled up in his head as his veins became visible in the form of thin, dark lines all over his body.

“There is no question,” the blank-faced Archbishop said impassively. “Something resides within the body. The circle will purge it.”

“The enemies in the astral space had something inside them,” Emir said, looking at Danielle with concern. “When endangered they were able to trigger it and kill themselves rather than be taken alive.”

“It is too late for that,” the Archbishop said. “Any power the thing inside him has cannot be activated within the circle. The concern you must have now is how deeply it has infiltrated his body. Removing it may damage or even kill him.”

“I have gold-rank potions of the highest grade ready to go,” Emir told Danielle. “So long as there is a scrap of life left in him, we won’t let it fade.”

“I will heal him the moment I am certain the taint is gone,” the Archbishop said.

Danielle didn’t acknowledge their words, her gaze unwavering from Jonah’s struggles. His body’s jerking became more violent, pushing back against the magic of the circle that held him in place. His eyes went bloody and dark, then burst outward, spraying dark fluids as something erupted from within them.

Flailing metal wires, thin as hairs, shot out in clusters from his now-empty eye sockets, waving like the tendrils of a sea creature. Danielle made to lunge forward but her arm was gripped by Emir, his gold-rank reflexes catching her before she moved. She turned on him in fury.

“You cannot help him until it is done,” the Archbishop said. “I would suggest prayer.”

Danielle shot the priest a look of venom before turning back to Jonah. She did so just in time for Jonah's cleansing to reach the final stage. Wires burst out from every part of his body, shredding muscle and skin, slicing apart bones. His flesh was shredded just as badly as his clothes as they erupted out of him.

The wires formed a complex network that seemed to have threaded itself through his entire circulatory system. A whole nest of wires had riddled Jonah's brain, slicing his skull into pieces that tumbled to the ground with the rest of his shredded corpse.

What was left was a vaguely man-shaped wire figure, with all the wires threading into and out of a nucleus in the place of the heart. Free of Jonah's body, the mass of wires staggered forward, but was rapidly corroded by exposure to the light of the circle. The wires dissolved into nothing as the nucleus fell to the floor with a hollow clatter.

In the aftermath, the light faded from the now-bloody circle. What had once been Jonah was splattered over the circle. All that remained of the wire construct was the empty nucleus. It looked like a small, hulled coconut. Danielle didn't spare it a glance as she staggered forward, toward the gory mess that was all that remained of Jonah.

"It's done," the Archbishop said, his emotionless intonation startling everyone but Danielle into looking at his calm expression. Emir and Thalia turned to Danielle, who mercifully didn't seem to have heard. She stood in front of Jonah's bloody remains, no longer recognisable as a person.

Chapter 133: It Just Takes Practise

In the late afternoon, Humphrey, Sophie and Jason were walking down a road with tall, leafy crops to either side. Finally starting to feel better, Jason let his head fall back as he drew a deep breath. He felt the warm sun of early autumn, smelled the fresh, earthy scent of the crops. He let out a contented sigh.

“This is it,” he said happily. “People talk about the money and the power but this is the adventuring life I want. Meandering through beautiful places with a good friend and a beautiful woman who may or may not be waiting for the chance to snap my neck and run for it.”

“Really?” Sophie asked flatly as Humphrey shook his head.

“I said ‘may not.’ Just look around you. Breathe in that air. Tell me you don’t want to spend your life travelling the world and visiting nice places.”

Sophie did look around, sceptically at first, then compared it to the boxed-in streets of Old City. The open spaces. The peaceful breeze playing through leafy crops.

“It does smell a lot nicer than Old City,” she acknowledged.

“Money and power are great,” Jason said. “Anything you want to get, they can give you. Anything you want to do, they can let you. But you have to want things worth having and want to do things worth doing. Money and power have to be a means, not an end, or you’ll lead a joyless life.”

Jason looked around the landscape again.

“Freedom. Travel. I want to see what this world has to show me. And someday, I want to go home. To see my own world with new eyes.”

Sophie said nothing, giving Jason an assessing look.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said. “You’re just not what I expected.”

“And what were you expecting?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Not this.”

“What’s your world like, Jason?” Humphrey asked.

“It has places like this,” Jason said. “My family used to take trips out into the country when I was younger. My mother has a large family of mostly rural types. Good, hardworking people, you know? Not all twisty in the head like me. I grew up in a sleepy little beach town. In summer it fills up with people. Later I moved to a big city, although nothing like Greenstone. I’m not sure how to even start describing it. I wasn’t happy there, but I don’t think I was trying to be, then.”

He flashed a grin.

“But now I’m here. I have money, magic powers and I’m walking around in a place like this on a day like today. Yes, monsters try to kill me a lot and I’ve made my share of enemies, but I’m living my life, now, instead of just waiting it out.”

“Speaking of monsters,” Humphrey said. “The contract is for margolls. Dog-headed humanoids with large claws. They should be a good matchup for you, Miss Wexler, but don’t underestimate them.”

“They’re highly aggressive and fight in packs,” Jason said. “You’ll be outnumbered. The contract says six, but you should never assume the details are accurate.”

“That’s an important lesson,” Humphrey said. “A couple of months ago, Jason and I went to retrieve the body of an adventurer killed because the contract details were wrong.”

“Very wrong,” Jason said. “We were lucky someone else didn’t end up coming for our bodies.”

“Margolls are another common local monster,” Humphrey said. “When they turn up, everyone evacuates and word is sent to the city to post a contract. There are several farms here, so they’ve probably settled in until they eat their way through the herds. Once Stash spots them, we’ll have a location.”

“Stash?” Sophie asked. “That’s the bird familiar you’ve had scouting around?”

“He’s been spending a lot of time as a bird, lately,” Humphrey said. “I’m not sure how much he understands about what happened during the expedition, but he knows there was a lot of danger. I think he’s trying to be more useful.”

“Spending time as a bird?” Sophie asked.

Humphrey was about to answer when a large bird swooped down out of the sky towards Humphrey, transforming into a puppy and dropping into his arms. Humphrey scratched him behind the ears.

“He’s a shape-changer,” Humphrey said. “You found them, little guy?”

Stash yipped happily. By turning his head and letting out little barks, Stash led them in the right direction. Eventually, they spotted the margolls in a field full of dead animals. The three crouched in the long grass, behind a simple, wooden rail fence that separated the field from the road. They looked through the fence at the margolls on the far side of the field.

“Looks like the margolls came from this side,” Humphrey said. “The herd fled to the far end of the field and were pinned against the fence and slaughtered.”

The slain herd were creatures that Jason had always thought of as cow lizards. The margolls had killed them all and were feasting on the carcasses.

“Those poor animals,” Humphrey said. “I know they were a meat herd, but they didn’t need to die in fear like that. And it’s wasteful, too. The margolls can’t consume all that meat, but they only eat their fresh kills. They’ll take their fill, sleep it off and go hunting for more things to slaughter.”

“No, they won’t,” Jason said. “They aren’t leaving this field. I count nine.”

“Me too,” Sophie said.

“Wexler, Humphrey will be ready to step in quickly if anything goes wrong. You need to understand, though, that when things go wrong, they go wrong fast and hard. I’m not saying don’t take risks, because pushing yourself is the point. Just make sure they’re calculated risks.”

Sophie took a steeling breath, then lightly vaulted the wooden fence and started walking across the field. Caught up in gorging on the dead animals, the margolls didn’t notice her until a breeze picked up and carried her scent to them. As it did, they looked up from their kills and howled. Leaping to their feet, they started charging across the field at her. She stopped walking, watching them approach.

Dog-headed monsters with sickle claws scrambled madly in her direction, some on two limbs, others on four. She started moving again, picking up pace to run at them as they charged in her direction, letting out discordant, bloodthirsty howls. They were quick, but she sailed over the grass like a wind spirit.

Well-short of reaching them, she leapt into the air. She span through one horizontal kick and then into a second with the other leg, both without touching the ground. Then she stepped on the air to keep her momentum going and kicked once more before finally landing. She had made two full turns in the air and landed at a run.

Each sweeping kick had unleashed a wide blade of wind that made a shimmering path toward the margolls. The trio of wide blades were as large and slow as she could make them, but the ravaging monsters disregarded their approach entirely.

The change came as the first blade savaged the foremost monsters, blood spraying as they ran right into the blade. It was not enough to kill them but to fell to the ground, howling distress. The one who stayed standing took the full brunt of the second blade, having its body cut into ragged halves, while more of the creatures were injured behind it. The third blade came on the heels of the second, finished wounded margolls and injuring more.

The pack were left angry, hurt and confused. The injured one howls their pain, the others their rage. Their charge had been halted as they milled in disarray.

Back on the road, Jason and Humphrey looked on using a far-sight crystal to magnify their view.

“Did you know she could do that?” Humphrey asked.

“I did not,” Jason replied. “Should we move closer?”

“I think so,” Humphrey said as wings appeared on his back and he flew over the fence. Jason vaulted it, not with the grace Sophie had done, but Gary’s mobility training made it a negligible task.

“How long would it take you to get over there?” Jason asked.

“A few seconds,” Humphrey said. “Five maybe.”

“You can cross the distance that quick?”

“If I fly forward, then launch into my flying leap attack, yes.”

“Not bad.”

The margolls were in turmoil and Sophie was not going to waste it, still running across the grass as if she were flying. She crashed into one of the injured ones, knocking it into the rest and adding to the chaos her wind blades had sown. The margolls fought with wild ferocity, while her movements were clean and efficient. Blocks made openings for attack and dodges set up combination strikes. Fists and feet, elbows and knees; no movement was wasted or opportunity missed as she pounded the margolls with power and precision.

Despite her speed and skill, the frenetic creatures were not on the back foot for long, using their numbers to box in their singular enemy. Sickle claws aimed to reap her life away, but were met with fists and forearms. Every attack she was able to meet, her powers shielded her from suffering so much as a scratch.

As they moved to surround her, she couldn’t intercept every attack. A raking slash from the side cut into her leg and from the rear a lacerating swipe scored her upper arm. She ignored the pain and kept fighting, having drawn them in as she wanted.

Having boxed her in, the monsters pushed in hard, only to find she had been replaced with an afterimage. As their claws lashed ineffectually through it, she reappearing a small distance away. As the clustered margolls milled in confusion, Sophie was launching another triple wind blade.

Having moved so close together in their attempt of overwhelm her, they had made themselves vulnerable to the sweeping blades of if air. The razor wind erupted on impact after slicing through skin and muscle, the blade hideously effective against the margolls who had no more defences than their short, bristly fur. After three blades only one was standing, badly injured. Sophie finished it off before making sure the ones on the ground were all dead.

Surrounded by dead enemies, Sophie stood tall and drew in heavy, exhausted breaths. Jason and Humphrey arrived at the scene as a bag of coins fell on her head.

“Ow.”

“When did you come up with that spinning jump thing?” Jason asked her.

“You left for two weeks,” she said, picking the bag. “Did you think I spent the whole time meditating?”

“Fair enough,” he said, taking the bag and putting it in his inventory. “Did Rufus help with that?”

“I think he felt bad for me.”

“Sorry,” Jason said. “I kind of left you in limbo, there.”

Jason took out a notebook scribbled in it with a pencil.

“What’s that?” Sophie asked.

“It’s how I’m keeping track of your money,” he said, putting them away again.

“Oh,” she said. “Thank you.”

“You have some real unarmed combat skills,” Humphrey said. “I have a relative, Phoebe. She’s an unarmed specialist, too, and she’s been looking for someone to practice with for a while. I think you could help each other.”

“I’d like that,” Sophie said, jerking a thumb at Jason. “She has to be more reliable than this guy.”

“Oh, come on,” Jason said.

“You did just leave without telling anyone,” Humphrey pointed out.

“Yeah, well... alright. That’s fair.”

“If you’re interested, then sooner might be better than later,” Humphrey said. “It would be dark long before we reached the city; my family estate is closer, here in the delta. I can introduce you to Phoebe and we can go back to the city in the morning.”

“Sounds good to me,” Jason said. “What do you say, Wexler? Want to be put up in the most prestigious estate in Greenstone? I’ll just loot these monsters and we can get going.”

“You realise you’re saying that to someone staying in Emir Bahadir’s cloud palace,” Humphrey said.

“I am going to miss having a cloud bed,” Jason said. “It was the worst part of leaving the city for so long.”

“I can’t offer those,” Humphrey said, “but we do have hammocks. They’re really good for the hot nights.”

“Never have sex in a hammock,” Jason advised. “It seems like it would be awesome, but it’s actually quite troublesome.”

“It just takes practise,” Humphrey said offhandedly, earning a wide-eyed look from Jason.

“What?” Humphrey asked.

“What are we looking at?” Rick asked.

In the mirage chamber control room, Rick, Belinda and Clive were looking through the window. Under the dome, a large illusionary orb and a small illusionary orb were pressing into one another.

“The small orb is a simulated astral space,” Clive said. “The big orb is a simulated world it’s attached to. This isn’t what they would actually look like; I simulated their magical aspects, rather than the physical ones.”

“Why?” Rick asked.

“A lot of equipment was brought back from the astral space,” Clive explained. “I managed to replicate what they were doing on a small scale, but I couldn’t figure out what it did. Using it in our world, instead of an astral space, meant all the power it output just got absorbed. Our world is too big. Of course, going back into the astral space and setting it up again was not an option. Here, we’ve created a simulation of an astral space, a world to anchor it and the equipment the expedition bought operating inside it.”

“So, instead of a monster, you created a whole world?” Rick asked.

“Not exactly,” Clive said. “I’ve examined the equipment quite thoroughly and isolated what it should interact with and simulated that. Simulating a whole world is beyond any mirage chamber I’ve ever heard of.”

“So, what are the results?” Rick asked.

“We’ll have to wait. I’ve accelerated the simulation as much as possible, and so long as I haven’t missed anything major, it will eventually show us exactly what the expedition interrupted.”

They watched eagerly for the first hour, attention waning in the second. Rick went and brought them all lunch while Clive and Belinda turned to books from Clive’s personal stash. After looking through Clive’s collection, Rick went to retrieve a book with less theory and more tales of dashing heroics.

It was evening before something changed on the inside of the chamber. They all went to the window, watching the two orbs.

“We already know what they were doing would have catastrophic results,” Clive said. “The major question is whether that was the objective or a side-effect.”

The two orbs had been pushing into each other for the entire run of the simulation, but as they watched, the smaller orb pulled away. The surface of the large orb, where the small orb had contacted it, was wrinkled and marred, where the rest was smooth.

“Is that it?” Rick asked.

“No,” Clive said. “The astral space, the small orb, shouldn’t be able to maintain its integrity without being attached to its world. Just pulling apart should have caused it to break down.”

“Is someone trying to make a small, independent world?” Belinda asked.

“If they are, it won’t work,” Clive said. “It can’t last long, like that.”

As if to prove his point, the smaller orb started to distort, breaking apart into chunks and then vanishing entirely.

“There we have it,” Clive said. “Their objective was to separate the astral space from our world while maintaining its structure for at least some amount of time.”

“How much time?” Belinda asked.

“Weeks. Months, at the outside. I’ll need to examine the simulation recording to get more details, but the basics are clear.”

“Why would they do that?” Rick asked.

“No idea,” Clive said.

“Who benefits?” Belinda asked. “And how?”

“From a huge chunk of dislodged physical reality, floating through the deep astral?” Clive asked. “No one. Even gods couldn’t do anything with it; once it leaves their world, it’s out of their ability to affect. All that leaves is...”

Clive’s eyes went wide as he let a low sound of horror out of his mouth.

“No...”

He paced back and forth, clutching at his hair with his hands.

“This is bigger than us,” he said. “Astral spaces. Ours wasn’t the only one affected. Oh, this is bad.”

“What’s bad?” Belinda asked. She and Rick were looking at Clive in frustration.

“I’ve figured it out,” he said.

“We got that much,” Belinda said. “What did you figure out?”

“We need to tell someone,” Clive said. “A diamond ranker. Lots of diamond rankers.”

He bolted for the door, Belinda and Rick following, only to meet Clive rushing back in. He gave Rick a wild-eyed look.

“I don’t know how to get back,” Clive said.

Chapter 134: World Building

The sky was nearing full dark but the pathways of the Geller estate were lit up by magical lights, albeit ones selected and placed more for aesthetics than practicality. Rather than simple illumination, the discretely placed lights washed the gardens in shifting colours.

Clive had no time to stop and appreciate it as he led Rick and Belinda through the gardens in a rush, striding with his long legs. Belinda did have time, as Clive's enthusiasm outpaced his ability to navigate, requiring Rick to correct him as he headed down one wrong path after another. This allowed Belinda to keep up in spite of her more measured pace.

"I like these lights," Belinda said.

"Good, aren't they?" Rick asked. "No, Clive, the left.

Clive grumbled as he came back up one path to head down another.

"Explain this again," Belinda said to Clive as he came past. "There's some kind of super god?"

"Yes," Clive said distractedly. "Except no. But yes. But no."

"That clears everything up," Rick said as Clive strode off again.

Compared to Clive, Humphrey, Sophie and Jason made their way through estate grounds at a relaxed saunter. They took the time to appreciate the colourfully lit paths.

"I looted some material from those trap weavers," Jason said. "My combat robes are made from the same stuff. I know a guy who can probably use it to make you something similar, Wexler."

"I thought you said I'd have to pay for my own gear," Sophie said.

"We're in a group," Jason said. "We split the loot as a group. You'll still have to pay for labour costs yourself."

"Thanks," she said with a frown. "Sorry, that sounded insincere. Gratitude isn't a feeling I'm used to."

Jason laughed.

"No worries. I know what it feels like to go from random nobody to adventurer with magic powers and such, hobnobbing with the wealthy and powerful. Which will be us, soon enough. It's a bit disorienting, isn't it? Feels hard to get your feet under you. Normal keeps

slipping away from you like a bar of wet soap. You're constantly trying to figure out what normal is, now."

"Yeah," she said. "That's exactly what it feels like."

Danielle, Emir, Thalia, Arella and the Archbishop were moving through the estate grounds from the ritual building toward the main house. Fresh from witnessing the gruesome demise of Jonah Geller, Danielle was still reeling, lingering at the back of the group. Ernest Geller, the only non-silver amongst them, had taken over the duty of guiding them through the grounds.

"I am not subjecting my son to that process," Thalia Mercer said adamantly as they moved along the path.

"That will not be necessary," said Herston, the Archbishop of purity. "Now that we know what we are dealing with, our methods can be more precise."

"We know what we're dealing with?" Arella asked.

"The boy was implanted with a star seed. My church has seen such things in the past and has long-developed the means to extract them. There will be damage, depending on how long the seed has been inside them, but no irrevocable harm."

"What good does that do Jonah?" Danielle spat. It was the first time she had spoken since Emir led her away from Jonah's ruined body.

"What is this star seed, exactly?" Emir asked.

"They are the creations of entities from beyond your physical reality, only existing in the deep astral," the Archbishop said. "They are known by various names, but most commonly as the great astral beings. There are heretics in our world who offer them improper veneration, perversely akin to how the pious worship the gods. The astral beings can bestow blessings, like gods, but cannot bestow essence and awakening stones. Instead, they can send their followers star seeds."

"Is that what the people we tried to capture were using to kill themselves?" Emir asked."

"Most likely," the Archbishop said. "The seed must first be implanted into the body. Once it has germinated, the body undergoes a transformation, which may be minor or major."

"We've seen that," Thalia said. "The people who attacked the expedition were bizarre combinations of flesh and steel."

“Once the transformation is complete, the remnant power of the star seed is available for the heretic to use. Exploding that power to kill themselves should be well within their capabilities.”

“And they put those things in our children,” Thalia growled. “I’m going to kill them all.”

“And so you should,” the Archbishop said. “The seeds turn the implanted people into vessels for the astral beings; puppets without will. Only the most dedicated volunteer for such a process. At first the influence is subtle. Their memories and personalities remaining intact, the only control being a drive to protect the seeds within them from discovery. Slowly, without their even realising it is happening, the hosts become puppets. Their personalities are supplanted, shifting towards the will of the astral being who crafted the seeds.”

“How long does that take?” Thalia asked.

“I don’t know,” the Archbishop said. “I only know this much because I have studied all manner and means of impurity. I have never encountered a star seed in person. I will consult my church’s records after returning to the city.”

“Why weren’t these seeds found before now?” Thalia asked. “All five were examined in the camp, then back in the city, by silver-rank healers. Why didn’t they find these things inside them?”

“Star seeds are not some affliction to be easily purged by an essence ability,” the Archbishop explained. “These are transcendent-rank objects, brought into being by entities so vast and alien that we cannot comprehend the fullness of them. They require more than some simple ritual or essence ability to discover, let alone, purge. We should give thanks to our gods for shielding us from such things.”

“Your god didn’t help Jonah,” Danielle said. “Your god’s ritual tore him apart.”

“Perhaps if your family were more dedicated in their piety, he would have been protected.”

The whole group stopped as Emir used a mirage step to get between Danielle and the Archbishop, holding a hand out to forestall her rage. After checking she wasn’t going to try and rush past him, Emir turned a fierce glare on the priest.

“You had best watch yourself, Archbishop,” Emir warned. “Keep talking like that and I won’t get in her way again.”

The Archbishop snorted derision but didn’t say anything else, resuming their passage through the gardens. After a heavy pause, the others followed.

“The next step must be to retrieve the other four,” Arella said as they neared the main house. “You are certain you can extract these seeds without harming the people they are implanted in?”

“Without harming, no; without killing, yes. I am certain my church has the means, although there are two requirements. First, we must get hold of the people that harbour them before the seeds have taken too deep a root. Once the seeds have overtaken the body, they impinge upon the soul, after which it is too late. The second requirement is that we need to know which astral entity created the seeds. Each such entity creates a different seed and must be adjusted for, accordingly.”

“That gives us two priorities, then,” Arella said. “First, retrieve the remaining four affected, which should be the easy part. The Adventure Society has people watching them, waiting on the results of this ritual. Now we are certain they’ve been compromised, we can have them brought in immediately. They will be apprehended and Mr Bahadir’s portal user can bring them back to Greenstone.”

“What about finding out which great astral being we’re dealing with?” Danielle asked. “I want to know who is doing this to us.”

“I can answer that!” a voice called out.

They were nearing the main house, where the pathways leading all through estate converged into an open space. Coming from another path was an agitated Clive, with Rick and Belinda in tow.

Rick cast an anxious gaze over the group. He saw that Jonah was not with them, while Ernest, who he had last seen guarding Jonah, was. Then he spotted Danielle, red-eyed and distraught, which startled him. He had never seen her in any state but complete self-control. Rick’s whole body slumped as he realised what that meant for Jonah’s fate.

“What are you talking about?” Arella asked Clive as he hurried over to them.

“You were talking about an astral entity, right?” Clive asked. “I know which one it is, and what it’s after.”

The two groups converged as Rick and Belinda followed, then grew again as Humphrey, Jason and Sophie appeared. Belinda and Sophie shared a surprised look at each other’s presence, while Humphrey was startled by his mother’s plain distress, rushing to her side. His large figure towered over her as he embraced her in a deep hug.

“I think, perhaps,” Arella said, “We should take any further discussion inside.”

She turned to Ernest.

“You were part of the group that found the five, yes?” she asked.

“I was,” Ernest said.

"I assume there is a speaking chamber here on the estate. The personal autonomy of the other four is no longer valid. Tell the rest of your group to take the remaining four into custody immediately and bring them in, under the full authority of the Adventure Society."

"Yes, Ma'am," Ernest said before moving off at a half-run.

"We have a conference room in the house," Danielle said, giving Humphrey's worried arms a reassuring pat as she moved out of them. "We can hear out Mr Standish there. Humphrey, please see to the rest of our guests."

Danielle led the group inside the house, leaving Humphrey with Jason, Belinda, Sophie and Rick.

"What are you doing here, Lindy?" Sophie asked.

"Complicated magic with the fate of the world at stake," Belinda said causally. "You?"

"It's getting late and I was offered a hammock."

"My thing is more exciting," Belinda said.

"Sounds like it. Who were all those people?"

"Just a bunch of rich folk," Belinda said. "So, a hammock? Do you remember that guy Barry? He always used to sleep in a hammock."

"Was he the one that got killed when an anvil fell on him?"

"That's the one. Building a smithy on the third floor was a terrible idea."

"I recall a lot of his ideas being bad."

"No kidding. He wanted to, you know, in his hammock one time. I thought it would be fun but it was just awkward."

"I'm told it takes practice," Sophie said.

"Of course you were told that," Belinda said. "Anyone who looks at you, their first thought is 'how to get that girl to practise sex with me a lot?' That's how we got into this whole mess, remember?"

"That's not how I'd describe it."

As the two women talked, Humphrey and Jason approached Rick, staring blankly into the air.

"Rick?" Humphrey asked.

"I don't think Jonah made it," Rick said absently, eyes unfocused.

"He's dead?" Humphrey asked.

"They didn't say, but you saw your mother."

Humphrey bowed his head, running his hands through it. "Gods damn it. I didn't know things were that bad."

"Ernest brought him in by portal," Rick said. "They had me waiting to go get all the..."

He waved his arm at the house where all the important people had gone, leaving them behind.

"Where was that?" Humphrey asked.

"The ritual room. The big, isolated one."

"Well, let's go take a look," Humphrey said. "See if we can't get some answers."

Humphrey pointed out a building annexed from the main house.

"That's one of the visitor residences," he said. "Jason, you, Miss Wexler and her friend can go straight in."

Jason nodded, patting Rick on the shoulder.

"Let me know about Jonah, yeah?"

"Of course."

Clive was pacing at the end of a conference room, while the group of Greenstone's most important people sat around the conference table.

"How did you know one of the great astral beings was involved?" Clive asked.

"You are here to answer our questions," the Archbishop said. "Not the other way around."

"Right, yes. Um, so, great astral beings. We don't know all that much about most of them, because only a handful seem to take any interest in physical realities. The World-Phoenix, the All-Devouring Eye, the Reaper, the Celestial Book. More than any of those, however, one called the Builder takes specific interest in physical realities."

"You seem well versed in the knowledge of these beings," the Archbishop said.

"Yes," Clive said. "I happen to venerate the Celestial Book myself. It's fairly common for those of us heavily involved in magical theory."

"You admit to being a heretic?" the Archbishop asked, half-standing. The rage on his face was a stark contrast to the emotionless way he had observed Jonah's horrific death.

Clive glared back at the Archbishop.

"I suppose I could be considered a heretic," Clive said. "The same way that the exploitation of rigid dogma to act out personal prejudice could be considered faith."

The Archbishop's silver-rank aura exploded out towards Clive but was immediately crushed by Emir's gold rank aura.

"This is not the time, Archbishop. We are here to listen, not judge."

"The gods are always judging us. Forgoing righteousness for expediency is an easy path to sin."

“And not shutting up is the path to being kicked out,” Danielle said. “This is my home and you are here by my forbearance.”

The Archbishop scowled but settled silently back into his seat.

“Emotions are running high, and with good reason,” Emir said. “That doesn’t change the fact that tempering ourselves will accomplish more than indulging ourselves will.”

Emir panned his gaze around the room, asserting his authority with a delicate but unmistakable employment of his aura.

“Please, continue, Mr Standish,” he said.

“Thank you,” Clive said. “As I was saying, there is one astral entity who takes more interest than the others in physical realities, which is to say, worlds like ours. Most of the others operate similarly to gods in that what they want is the promotion of various ideals. The World-Phoenix fosters dimensional integrity; the Celestial Book promotes the understanding of magic’s underlying nature. The Reaper advocates the finality of death. The Builder is not like these others. It has no interest in disseminating principals and is instead obsessed with physical reality while, by its very nature, being unable to co-exist with it. This dichotomy of its core drive and its intrinsic properties has led to an undertaking on such ambition it staggers belief.”

“What kind of undertaking?” Emir asked.

“It is building a world of its own,” Clive said. “Creating a new physical reality in the deep astral. The way it does this is to take raw materials that are neither fully of the astral or of physical reality.”

“You’re talking about astral spaces,” Arella said.

“Exactly,” Clive said. “Astral spaces form attached to worlds, without which they immediately break down. Without a world to anchor them, they cannot exist. But if an astral space is given the ability to sustain itself, even for just a brief period, the Builder can take it and anchor it to the world the Builder is creating from stolen parts.”

“You’re saying that those people we fought were trying to steal the astral space for this Builder?” Arella asked. “A dimensional pirate, plundering chunks of reality from which to build its own?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. An astral being cannot interact with physical reality directly, so it needs to recruit others to act for it. The Builder recruits people to carve off the astral spaces connected to their world, then it steps in and claims them. I’ve read about the Builder doing this, but now I’ve seen the means by which it does so.”

“What are the ramifications of losing astral spaces?” Emir asked.

“It varies, since different astral spaces are connected to worlds in different ways. The process they were using in our local astral space was designed to keep the astral space intact, at the cost of catastrophic destruction to the physical reality. I can confidently assert that the results would be similar in other instances.”

“We have reports of astral spaces suffering incursions like ours all over the world,” Arella said.

“That’s right,” Clive said. “Astral spaces, all over the world. We’re talking about cataclysmic destruction the world over. Death and destruction on a civilisation-ending scale. The only comfort I can take is that there are smarter people than me looking into all this and stronger people than us doing something about it. This is a threat that extends beyond the reaches of our world. We need diamond rankers to act, and act fast.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Mr Standish,” Emir said. “The information you’re giving us is not information we’ve been getting from elsewhere. Either they don’t know, or they are hiding the potential risks to avoid panic.”

“At the risk of agreeing with the Archbishop,” Thalia Mercer said, “how confident are you in this information, Standish?”

“Very,” Clive said. “My knowledge of the great astral beings comes from one of the Magic Society’s previous directors. The great astral beings were his field of study and he had a collection of journals from diamond-rank adventurers who had travelled between worlds. He left those to me after his death and I know them well.”

“And you’re sure this Builder’s people are the ones doing these things to our astral spaces?” Thalia asked.

“Yes. The Builder, as I mentioned, has no driving ideology. He forms groups, cults, driven not by ideology, but through gifts of power. The fact that we are seeing any of this suggests they have been operating here for years. Maybe decades.”

“But you are certain this Builder is behind them?” Arella asked.

“I have managed to successfully simulate what they were doing in the Geller’s mirage chamber. The goal of their efforts was to reinforce the astral space and sever it from our world. Nothing short of a great astral being has the power to make anything of such an act, and of them, only the Builder has any interest in it.”

“I think our next move should be to confirm this information as best we can,” Arella said. “If combine we what we’ve seen today, Mr Standish’s findings and the experiences of the expedition together, we may well have at least an acceptable level of confirmation to disseminate to the Adventure Society at large.”

“Mr Standish, I’d like a look at those journals, if you don’t mind,” Emir requested.

“I’ve made copies of the originals,” Clive said. “I’ll deliver them to your cloud palace.”

“I shall look into the records of our rituals for removing star seeds,” the Archbishop said. “There may be details in the rituals for removing this Builder’s seeds that help confirm he is the one.”

“Thank you,” Emir said.

“I’ll turn the more scholarly members of my family loose on the temple of knowledge’s library,” Danielle said. “The goddess always welcomes seekers of truth.”

“I’ll do likewise,” Thalia said.

“I will make sure that everything we learn is spread to the Adventure Society as a whole and see if they have anything in return,” Arella said. “We aren’t the only ones dealing on this problem, but one group of many working to contribute.”

“Good,” Emir said, standing up. “We all have our tasks; we should get to them. Well done, Mr Standish.”

“The hour is getting late,” Danielle said, also getting up. “You are all welcome to stay the night. We have ample room.”

Thalia and Emir accepted the offer, with the Archbishop and Elspeth Arella declining; everyone recognised that neither the priest nor the Adventure Society director were truly welcome in Danielle Geller’s home. They went off to their transport while Danielle led Thalia, Emir and Clive toward the guest wing.

“Mr Standish,” Emir said as they left the conference room. “Have you ever considered becoming a professional treasure hunter?”

Chapter 135: Fabulous Prizes

The day's first light found Jason meditating on a porch. It was attached to just one of the Geller family guest houses, each larger than the four-bedroom home Jason grew up in. Like most of the Geller estate building, it was nestled amongst the lush greenery of the gardens.

-
- Ability [Cloak of Night] (Dark) has reached Iron 6 (100%).
 - Ability [Cloak of Night] (Dark) has reached Iron 7 (00%).
-

Jason opened his eyes. His recent two-week storm of monster hunting had not been as effective at raising his abilities as he hoped. His lower-level abilities improved well enough, but his highest-rank ones were starting to plateau. Once he was back in the city, he would seek out Rufus for advice.

Jason Asano

- Race: Outworlder.
- Current rank: iron
- Progression to bronze rank: 25% (2/4 essences complete)

Attributes

- [Power] (Blood): [Iron 5].
- [Speed] (Dark): [Iron 0].
- [Spirit] (Doom): [Iron 0].
- [Recovery] (Sin): [Iron 5].

Racial Abilities (Outworlder)

- [Party Interface].
- [Quest System].
- [Inventory].
- [Map].
- [Astral Affinity].
- [Mysterious Stranger].

Essences (4/4)

Dark [Speed] (3/5)

- [Midnight Eyes] (special ability): [Iron 8] 19%.
- [Cloak of Night] (special ability): [Iron 7] 00%.
- [Path of Shadows] (special ability): [Iron 7] 04%.

Blood [Power] (5/5)

- [Blood Harvest] (spell): [Iron 6] 98%.
- [Leech Bite] (special attack): [Iron 6] 14%.
- [Feast of Blood] (spell): [Iron 5] 92%.
- [Sanguine Horror] (familiar): [Iron 6] 89%.
- [Haemorrhage] (spell): [Iron 5] 06%.

Sin [Recovery] (5/5)

- [Punish] (special attack): [Iron7] 23%.
- [Feast of Absolution] (spell): [Iron 6] 23%.
- [Sin Eater] (special ability): [Iron 6] 69%.
- [Hegemony] (aura): [Iron 7] 69%.
- [Castigate] (spell): [Iron 5] 23%.

Doom [Spirit] (4/5)

- [Inexorable Doom] (spell): [Iron 7] 16%.
- [Punition] (spell): [Iron 6] 54%.
- [Blade of Doom] (spell): [Iron 4] 39%.
- [Verdict] (spell): [Iron 3] 94%.

Jason could feel the changes in his attributes. His power attribute made him stronger than he had been before. He could better handle being knocked around by monsters, as well. It was nothing like the superhuman strength of Gary or even Rufus, but compared to his previous self it was definitely noticeable. Additionally, his increased recovery attribute had greatly increased his stamina, and his mana recovery was quicker than previous.

The changes were reflected in his physical appearance, as well. His meagre physique wasn't bulking out, but flaccid muscle was gradually becoming sleek and lean. He stood up and stretched.

"Feeling sexy."

"What was that?" Emir asked, approaching along a garden path.

"I said I'm feeling sexy," Jason said. "I'm not ashamed to admit it. You're up and about, early."

"Lots to do," Emir said. "I wanted to talk to you before I headed back for the city."

Jason returned his meditation mat to his inventory and gestured Emir towards the outdoor furniture on the porch.

"Iced tea?" Jason offered.

"That would be nice," Emir said. The delta heat was already rising. Jason took a pair of tall glasses and a pitcher from his inventory. He filled a glass with ruby red tea, chilled by the chunks of ice in the pitcher. Emir took an appreciative sip.

"What did you put in this?" he asked.

“Gem berries,” Jason said. “They’re in season.”

Emir took another sip before turning to his main topic.

“The reason I’ve come by is that I wanted to talk to you. I anticipated having this conversation earlier but the delay is for the best, given recent revelations. How much are you aware of what’s going on?”

“You mean the monster from beyond reality who likes playing with blocks? Clive told us about it last night.”

“Did you hear about the star seeds?”

“Yeah. Between what Ernest saw and Clive knows, I think I have it all.”

“What do you think about what our enemies are doing, seeding those people?”

Jason rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“I think their plan is going about as well as they could ask, given it was almost certainly hatched in a very short time.”

“Care to expand on that?” Emir asked.

Jason snorted a laugh

“You know, I had teachers like you,” he said. “The ones that make you keep talking until they’re sure you’re right, or sure you’re wrong.”

Emir chuckled. “I think I’m starting to understand some of Rufus’ complaints about you. Why don’t you go ahead and indulge me?”

“Fine,” Jason said. “Think about it from the bad guys’ perspective. They’ve been working for months in this astral space, only for a small army of adventurers to arrive. They know the jig is up, so they knock together a hasty plan. Use their construct army to send the invading adventurers into disarray, giving the villains of the piece time to extricate their people. While they’re at it, they snag some iron-rankers in the chaos, shove in some star seeds and leave them in suspiciously easy to find locations. They scarper, leaving us with a bunch of suspiciously suspicious people to be suspicious of. Which we are. Secretive meetings between powerful people; the local powers scrambling to figure out what’s been done to them without setting off a political volcano. In the meantime, their actual agents are running around without us wondering if they even exist.”

“You think the five were a distraction?”

“It’s the only thing they’re good for. Attempting to use them as agents for some agenda would be pointless because they’ve been watched from the moment we got them back, which was obviously going to happen. My guess would be that they have a secondary objective. Maybe another astral space, somewhere.”

“How would you go about figuring out if they’re just a distraction?”

“That’s easy; the key is the other four. They’re only iron rank, so if they mysteriously slip the higher-rank people who try and bring them in, forcing us to focus even more time and resources on them, then they’re definitely a distraction. Whoever is responsible for that might have even let Jonah get taken so they would find what’s inside him. That way, we have to make retrieving the others the priority, even if we figure out they’re a distraction. We can’t just leave a bunch of wealthy scions full of interdimensional mind-control bombs.”

Emir gave Jason an assessing look as he refilled his glass.

“So, teach, was I right or wrong?”

“We send word to bring the four in last night,” Emir said. “They all escaped the people keeping an eye on them. The Hornis branch of the Adventure Society is conducting a large-scale search.”

“There you go,” Jason said. “You need to get people looking for the real agents, maybe find out if there’s another astral space nearby. But you already have people on that, don’t you.”

“There is another astral space,” Emir said. “Smaller than the desert astral space, and different in several key ways. It’s been hidden for longer than Greenstone has been here, but it’s still here.”

“Sounds like you have things well in hand,” Jason said.

“There are some complications,” Emir said. “I’ve already mentioned to you the event I came to Greenstone to conduct.”

“Oh,” Jason said. “This place you want explored is an astral space?”

“Yes, but one much harder to enter than the desert astral space. It requires certain conditions to open that I have spent most of the last two years looking to fulfil, all while looking for the entrance.”

“Which is here,” Jason said.

“Not right here, but close enough. I had my people confirm it shortly after I arrived. The major complication, however, is that even once opened, only iron-rankers may enter. We’ve tried considerable measures to get around it, none of which were found to be viable.”

“So you need a bunch of iron rankers to explore it for you,” Jason said.

“Precisely. There is something my client wants inside it and considerable rewards await whoever brings it to me.”

“Two years of searching; I imagine the rewards that await you are even more considerable.”

“Indeed they are,” Emir said. “It’s what allows me to be so generous.”

“How generous is that?”

“I’m not going to tell you the main prize, but the secondary prize is five legendary awakening stones for whichever team brings me the item. That should give you some indication.”

“Five legendary stones is the secondary prize? That’s generous, alright.”

“Unfortunately, your chances of winning the prize have rather dropped,” Emir said.

“Oh?”

“You know I pushed back the event, in the wake of the expedition.”

“You’re talking about the iron rankers you’re shipping in from outside the city? It’s going to be harder because I won’t just be up against Greenstone’s trashy iron-rankers.”

“Essentially, yes.”

“It doesn’t really change anything. The smart money was always on Beth Cavendish and her team, or maybe one some of the Geller groups. Rick’s team has taken some hits, but they have, what? Five more teams?”

“Humphrey is a Geller. Are you going to formalise a team?”

“We’ve talked about it.”

“You should do more than talk,” Emir said. “Your abilities should be starting to slow down their advancement by now, yes.”

“Actually, yes,” Jason said. “What’s that got to do with a team?”

“You need to start focusing on the contracts for which you are poorly-suited. You need to push yourself harder.”

“I get it,” Jason said. “Go for the hard stuff, but have a team to save you when it goes wrong.”

“Exactly.”

“Thanks for the advice.”

Emir finished his glass of iced tea.

“Another?” Jason offered.

“Please.”

Emir let out a sigh as Jason poured.

“These revelations about astral spaces are having an unpleasant impact on my plans,” he said.

“Do they want you to leave the astral space sealed, or use it as bait?” Jason asked.

“Bait. They want an examination by the purity church to be a condition of participation, but only tell people that once they’re assembled onsite. I’m not sure if the

church can muster an appropriate test, but we may uncover people when they refuse to be subjected to it.”

“I’m not sure I’m willing to be subjected to it,” Jason said. “What kind of examination are we talking about?”

“I don’t know. The impression I get is that these seeds are hard to discover without invasive methods.”

“Well if you think I’m letting a priest shove a probe up in me, you’re sorely mistaken, which I imagine will be the majority opinion. Not to mention that if I were these people, the iron-rankers I’d send would be evil-implant free.”

“Whatever we decide to do,” Emir said, “I’ll be asking certain participants I trust to keep an eye out in the astral space. We have no idea who could be a Builder cultist.”

Jason frowned.

“That rings a bell,” he said. “Builder cultist. I’ve seen that somewhere.”

“Where?”

“Can’t remember,” Jason said, absently scratching his head. “I’m sure I’ve seen it, but... oh, that’s going to annoy me until I figure it out.”

Emir drained his second glass.

“That’s really good, thank you,” he said, standing up. “I’ll leave you to it; I want to call in on our hostess before I go.”

“She didn’t look in the best way, yesterday,” Jason said. “She took Jonah’s death hard.”

“Danielle blames herself for the expedition’s failures. Not as much as she blames Elspeth Arella, but still. Then once she thinks it’s all over, her family loses someone else.”

“I knew Jonah,” Jason said. “He was easy to hate, but also hard to stop yourself from liking. Eventually. We need to get these people.”

“Yes we do,” Emir said as he stepped off the porch. “Try and remember where you heard about Builder cultists from. If we can track down any of their activities outside the astral space, it might be the thread we follow right to them.”

Jason, Humphrey and Sophie joined Clive and Belinda to travel back to the city in Clive’s airboat. Due to the space constraints, Clive’s rune tortoise, Onslow, was unable to take his usual position on the prow. Clive called him back into his body, where he appeared on Clive’s torso as a runic tattoo.

“What ability do you get when Onslow merge into you?” Jason asked.

“I can use the rune powers on his shell as spells,” Clive said.

“That’s nice,” Humphrey said. “It’s like having even more essence abilities. That’s a fantastic familiar power.”

Humphrey’s own familiar, Stash, was currently in puppy form, laid back in Belinda’s lap, getting a scratch on the tummy. He suddenly struggled out of Belinda’s clutches and started trying to push himself into Humphrey’s leg.

“Silly boy,” Humphrey said, picking him up. “You can’t go inside me; you’re not that kind of familiar.”

Puppy Stash let out a little whine, giving Humphrey a pouty look before transforming into a bird.

“No!” Humphrey yelled as bird Stash leapt from his hand and promptly got sucked through the magical ring at the rear as it pull air through itself to propel the boat.

“Again?” Clive asked as he slowed down the airboat. “Every time, this happens.”

“You’ve heard me tell him,” Humphrey said.

“You need to get control of your familiar,” Clive said.

“You aren’t in any more control of your familiar,” Humphrey said. “It’s just so slow that you can’t tell it’s running away.”

The airboat came to a full stop and a frog the size of a St. Bernard swam up to the side, threatening to tip the airboat as it tried to climb on.

“You’re too big,” Humphrey told it and it turned back into a puppy that adorably scrambled at the side of the boat before plopping back into the water. Humphrey reached down to pluck it out, ignoring how wet his clothes were getting as he held Stash to his chest.

“Poor little guy. It happened again, didn’t it?”

The wet puppy snuggled into Humphrey’s chest as Clive started the boat up again. As they closed in on the city, Jason remembered the voice chat they had as they left.

“Are you going to see Hudson about joining Rick’s team when you get to the city?” Jason asked Humphrey.

“That’s right,” Humphrey said.

“You know there was another guy who was on Thadwick’s team,” Jason said. “If we’re going to put a team together ourselves, we’ll need a healer.”

“Neil Davone,” Humphrey said. “I can go and talk to him after, but it may be too late already. Even with Thadwick on his record, people will snatch up a loose healer.”

“I should be the one to do it,” Jason said.

“Are you sure?” Humphrey asked. “You had a history with Thadwick yourself.”

“That’s why it has to be me. If it’s going to work, that air needs to be cleared.”

“Alright, then. That’ll make five, then right?”

“Yep,” Jason said.

“Who are the other two?” Clive asked.

“You and her,” Jason told him, jerking a thumb at Sophie.

“You want me on your team?”

“Of course we do,” Humphrey said.

“Don’t you want someone, I don’t know... good?”

Jason and Humphrey shared a glance and laughed.

“You are good,” Humphrey told Clive.

“I am?”

“You are,” Jason said.

“Oh,” Clive said, tilting his head with a nonplussed. “Really?”

“Don’t get me wrong; you’re no solo operator,” Jason said. “You need someone to stand between you and the bad guy, but once you have that, you’ve got the goods.”

“And she’s good too?” Clive asked, looking at Sophie.

“No, but she’s cheap,” Jason said, right before Sophie punched him on the arm.

“Ow. Don’t forget you’re my indentured servant; I can make you walk the plank. Does anyone have a plank in their storage space?”