

Chapter 141: Weaponising a Barbecue

Jason met Neil at the entrance to the cloud palace, along with one of Emir's staff who added Neil's aura signature to the access list for the palace.

"There are some restricted areas," Jason explained as they entered. "You shouldn't bump into any of those except the guest suites, which are individually locked to guests who can provide you entry or not."

Neil didn't say much looking around, wide-eyed as Jason led him to the guest wing. He was nervous, second-guessing his choice of team, but Jason was welcoming and friendly. He also seemed at home in the astounding surrounds of the cloud palace.

"We're going to start with a little welcoming lunch," Jason said. "You can meet the team and some of the people around it. After that we're going to spend the afternoon on a preliminary strategy session, looking at everyone's abilities and working on tactical concepts around them. From here on out, that's going to be our everyday; develop tactics, workshop them in the training room, then test them in the field."

"You're getting ready for the event Bahadir is planning?" Neil asked.

"You heard about that?" Jason asked.

"Word has gotten around."

"Certainly, being prepared for that is a good idea," Jason said. "Our sights are set past that, though. We're looking at the path to bronze and beyond. We want to establish a playbook of strategies and tactics that we know so well as a team that we're ready to go at any moment. As our abilities grow we can adapt and refine our repertoire, but the first step is working together, everyone knowing their potential roles. I hope you're not afraid of hard work and training."

"To be honest, Asano, you always struck me as more frivolous than hard-working."

"I'm a work-hard, play hard kind of bloke," Jason said. "Talking doesn't mean much, though. You can judge for yourself."

Jason led Neil onto an elevating platform that lifted them to the upper reaches of the cloud palace, before heading out to a terrace crowded with people, tables of food and a pair or large flame grills. Amongst the crowd were people Neil recognised. Rufus Remore was chatting with Vincent Trenslo and his absurd moustache; Humphrey Geller was flipping meat on one of the grills. Danielle Geller was chatting with Emir Bahadir, both holding grilled meat and vegetable sticks. He even spotted his friend and previous teammate, Dustin biting into a steak sandwich. Dustin's cousin, Hudson, was next to him

and they were surrounded by their respective teams. Dustin was on a Geller team now, looking more relaxed than Neil had seen him in a long time.

“What’s all this?” Neil asked.

“If you’re going to chuck a barbie,” Jason said, “you get some mates around. Let’s grab some tucker and I’ll make some introductions.”

The barbecue lunch went on into the afternoon, leaving Neil disoriented from a heady mix of grilled meats, quality alcohol and the kind of political connections his family only dreamed of. It was a social event wholly unlike those he had experienced in the Mercers’ orbit.

Everything was casual and the people present genuinely seemed to like each other. There was no carefully orchestrated social sniping, no playing one family against another. There was no stratification of rank, with bronze, silver and even gold-rankers happily chatting with iron. Instead of dainty, delicate finger food, people had meat piled into plates, skewered onto sticks or shoved between slabs of bread. There were tables of side dishes heaped into enormous bowls for anyone to grab by the tong-full.

Neil could hear the voice of his mother telling him to be mercenary, ditch Asano and seize the opportunity and forge connections. The voice seemed at a loss as Jason led him around, making introductions with no prompting on his part. People asked him questions, seeming actually interested instead of just digging for some useful titbit they could use.

“How long have you been in Greenstone,” Neil asked Jason between conversations.

“About five months.”

“How did you make these kinds of political allies in five months?”

“I didn’t,” Jason said. “I made friends.”

Jason found Humphrey away from the group, looking unhappy as he started out over the ocean. Jason joined him in leaning on the rail.

“What’s got you down, mate?”

“It’s Gabrielle,” Humphrey said. “Things aren’t going to work out with her.”

“That sucks,” Jason said. “Sorry to hear it. I’m guessing I wasn’t helpful in that regard.”

“It’s more than just that,” Humphrey said. “I would never ask her to choose between me and her religion, but she’s becoming more and more dogmatic. She’s becoming honest to the point of rudeness; demanding secrets she has no right to.”

“Well, I do the rude honesty thing too,” Jason said. “But in my defence, I also lie a lot.”

Humphrey laughed, then sighed.

“She’s started telling me who I shouldn’t spend my time with,” he said. “It’s why she’s not here. She really doesn’t like you and Rufus but that’s just the start of it. The strictures of her god are all well and good, but I’m not a follower of Knowledge. She has no right to hold me to those principles.”

“I’m sorry,” Jason said. “I’m at least a bit responsible for nudging you in her direction.”

“I’m not sorry,” Humphrey said. “I care for Gabrielle and I’ve enjoyed our time together. That time is just coming to an end.”

“Wow,” Jason said. “That’s super-mature of you. I was a couple of years older than you when my first big relationship ended and I blew up my whole life over it, like an idiot.”

“I’m going to tell her tomorrow,” Humphrey said. “She probably already knows.”

“Because of her boss,” Jason realised. “Damn, that must have been really annoying, having the goddess telling her everything.”

“It wasn’t my favourite thing,” Humphrey acknowledged. He turned to look over at the gathering. “How’s Neil fitting in?”

“A bit shell-shocked. You think it was the right thing, bringing out the big social guns? I don’t like weaponising a barbecue.”

“His family have been second-tier nobility for generations and this will get his family’s support. As for Neil himself, that’s up to you and me.”

As things wound down, Jason and Emir sent people off, usually with food in bags with a cheap, short-lived enchantment to keep the food inside them fresh and hot. Afterwards, Jason gathered their team together. Neil had now met the others; the lanky Clive Standish and the startlingly beautiful Sophie Wexler. Neil hadn’t been sure what to expect from Jason’s indentured servant, but the woman with silver hair, dark skin and sharp, wary eyes certainly wasn’t it. She was the one he had been the most uncertain about, but watching her sleek liveness made him a lot more confident.

They went off to Jason’s suite in the guest wing. Amongst all the cloud furniture, a trio of wooden bookcases stood out, jammed-full of leather-bound tomes. Even more books were stacked up on a table next to a reading chair, one of which Clive picked up to examine.

“This is some heavy theory,” he said to Jason. “You’re finally taking my advice?”

“This was Farrah’s collection,” Jason said sadly, gesturing at the bookcases. “She was like you, telling me to not just rely on skill books. With these, it’s almost like she’s still teaching me.”

“Farrah was one of the Vitesse adventurers,” Humphrey quietly mentioned to Neil. “She fell during the expedition.”

They sat down and Jason took out a notebook. Recorded in it were the abilities of everyone in the party, to which they added Neil’s. His essence combination was shield, growth and renewal, producing the prosperity confluence. Along with healing and cleansing powers, Neil could create short-lived shields that intercepted attacks, empower allies and replenish their mana and stamina.

“That’s an awesome power set,” Jason said as he wrote them down. “Not great if you get caught alone, but any team you’re on should celebrate. Which is our team, I guess, so... cheers, mate!”

As his powers were most effective when used on allies, Neil was highly reliant on his summoning power when fighting alone. It was not a summoned familiar but a temporary summons, like Gary’s forge golem or Farrah’s magma elemental. It would only last for a limited time, but he could afford to risk it in ways that he couldn’t with a familiar.

His summon was an entity called a chrysalis golem. It was a crystalline construct monster, it could create a protective shell around itself when it was badly damaged. When it emerged, it was fully repaired and adapted to resist the attacks that had previously harmed it.

“I can’t wait to get a look at that thing,” Jason said. “With Humphrey’s summons that makes two, excluding the summoned familiars Clive and myself have. We should be able to do some interesting things with them.”

Humphrey took the lead in discussions as they started devising potential strategies.

“The most fundamental thing is that we each need to have a sound grasp of each other’s abilities,” he said. “Neil, this is especially true for you, whose abilities rely heavily on judgement and timing. You’ll learn as we train, of course, but you should have at least a general idea of what each of us does before we start digging into specific tactics.

“Let’s start with Humphrey, then,” Jason said. “His essences are might, magic, wing and dragon. He moves faster, hits harder and withstands more damage than most adventurers. His attacks are mostly conventional melee powers, but they’re reliable and land like a truck.”

“What’s a truck?” Neil asked. “Is that some kind of monster?”

“It’s a big, heavy, fast thing,” Jason said grouchy. “It’s not my fault your stupid world doesn’t have internal combustion.”

“Lots of people have internal combustion,” Clive said. “Mostly from the fire essence, which is why it’s common.”

Jason groaned at Clive while Humphrey picked up the explanations.

“Clive has the magic, rune, balance and karmic essences. Unlike most humans, his focus is on spells. He can use magical weapons like staves and wands and works with his familiar to output reliable ranged damage. He also has some utility powers, trap magic and the ability to make our enemies suffer retributive damage from attacking us.”

“He also has some big-ticket attacks, if he goes all out,” Jason added. “If we need a single, big hit, he’s our guy. Those hefty spells need some setup, though, so we’ve already started devising strategies around them.”

“Miss Wexler is an evasion-type defender,” Humphrey said. “Swift, wind, balance and mystic. She is the newest of us, with many abilities still to awaken, but she is already the fastest and hardest to harm out of all of us. I have no doubt she will become increasingly formidable.”

“Asano is the sneaky prick of the team,” Sophie said. “His essences are dark, blood, sin and doom.”

“Sin and doom?” Neil asked. “They sounds like they should be on the restricted list.”

“They’re not,” Jason said. “We checked.”

“Jason is an affliction specialist,” Humphrey said. “Once he goes to work, whatever he’s fighting is finished, even if it seems to have gotten away. He’s also a good scout, with stealth and mobility.”

“Obviously, we don’t expect you to remember all this,” Humphrey said. “You’ll have plenty of time to learn, because that’s what we do, now. We get up, we meet up, then we train. Physical and mobility training we do in Old City.”

“When Jory renovated his clinic,” Jason said, “he turned his yard into a dedicated training space. So, thanks for helping stop it from being knocked down.”

“That wasn’t really me,” Neil said.

“Of course it was,” Jason said. “If you didn’t stand up to them and force the confrontation, the Healer might have waited until they tore down the place and then smote them all as sinners.”

“We’ll be alternating our time between developing strategies, refining them in practice areas or testing them in the field,” Humphrey said.

“The practise areas being the training hall, here in the cloud palace, or in Humphrey’s mirage chamber.”

“It’s not my mirage chamber,” Humphrey said.

“Other than that, it’ll be contracts and adventure notices,” Jason said. “That is going to be our day, every day, until Emir’s mysterious contest. We’re going into it as strong as we can be.”

“Is that going to be a problem, Neil?” Humphrey asked. “We’re looking for someone willing to go at this hard, so if that isn’t you, tell us now.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Neil said. “I’ve been waiting for a team that takes adventuring seriously.”

He looked at Jason. “I wasn’t sure that was you.”

“You can judge for yourself,” Jason said. “Today, we’re all talk. We throw every idea at the wall and see what sticks. Tomorrow we start figuring out what’s practical and what’s some overwrought notion I got in my head because I forgot simplicity is king.”

They moved onto the discussion of specific strategies, under the direction of Humphrey.

“I think you’re overlooking what should be our core strategy,” Jason told Humphrey, early into the discussion.

“What’s that?” Humphrey asked.

“You,” Jason said. “You do more damage than most and can survive more damage than most. With Clive and Neil, we have two buffers, plus shields and healing. Neil can even top-off your mana. We load all of that up on you and let you go ham. Add in your mobility and you’ll be an absolute terror to whatever we’re fighting.”

Uncertainty crossed Humphrey’s face.

“Are you sure you want to rely that heavily on me?”

Jason shook his head. “Oh, Humphrey. Hands up who wants to rely on Humphrey as the core of the team.”

Sophie and Clive put up their hands with Jason, Neil raising his hand right after.

“It’s adorable that you’re modest enough that I have to tell you this Humphrey,” Jason said, “but everyone likes and trusts you.”

Humphrey looked around the group, embarrassed.

“Now,” Jason said. “If we take that as our core strategy, all our tactics should be smooth adaptations of that default. What do you reckon, Humphrey?”

“Well, there are a few points that we need to look at using that as a strategy. First would be identifying and distracting anyone or anything with the singular attack power to punch through the buffs and shields.”

“So, the other team’s Clive,” Sophie said.

“Exactly,” Humphrey said. “For other Clives, we want you and Jason to at least distract and interfere, or preferably put them down.”

“I’m not sure I love this ‘other Clive’ analogy,” Clive said.

“What about actual Clive and the new guy?” Sophie asked. “They aren’t as mobile as the rest of us, and if we’re using a mobile attacking strategy, they’ll be left exposed.”

“Yes,” Humphrey said. “They’ll make a tempting target, so instead of trying to cover it, we use it.”

“I like it,” Jason said. “We’ve already worked up strategies using Clive as bait, so develop them and make Neil the second juicy worm of the hook. Turn what seems like a weakness into a weapon.”

Clive and Neil shared a glance.

“I’m not sure I like this plan,” Clive said.

Chapter 142: This Town Ain't Big Enough

The mirage chamber had created a sprawl of ancient, desert ruins. It was a town, long since dead and dry. Built into a hillside, crumbling buildings clung to the steep slope or were dug right into the yellow desert rock. Tunnels and stairwells were alternately exposed or buried by the dilapidating power of time, forming a rat's nest of unsafe passages and hidden nooks. Of the handful of intact buildings, none had a neighbour in the same condition, the slope a mess of tumbled brick and stone, half-gone walls and debris-filled, hard earth streets. The air shimmered with heat as the unyielding sun beat down on the clay and stone remnants of the town. Through the steep ruins, three teams stalked one another. Hiding and moving, they risked precarious tunnels and rooftops as they sought to find prey without becoming someone else's.

"Keep an eye on the shadows," Rick Geller warned his team. "Asano is the strongest scout in here and we all know what he can do if we let him play his games."

"Oh, I have all kinds of games," Jason's voice echoed loudly through the ruins.

"He's doing it again," said Claire Adeah, the healer and one of two elf sisters on the team. "That guy is so annoying."

"He's just trying to get you riled up," her sister said from above. "He knows he can't try what he did last time, but he'll still try and mess up your thinking."

Scouting from a rooftop, Hannah Adeah was an archer, the team's only remaining ranged specialist. The expedition and its aftermath claimed both Jonah and Henry Geller, their front-line guardian and magic ranged attacker. Their new members were Dustin Kettering, a local who filled Jonah's defender role, and Rick's sister, Phoebe.

Dustin's cousin, Hudson, was his counterpart on Beth Cavendish's team and currently an enemy. Dustin was a classic defender, not very mobile but very hard to go around or through. This put him very much in the role of the team member he replaced, unlike Phoebe. Instead of a ranged magic attacker, she was a fast melee attacker using unarmed combat. This forced a change in general strategy for the team, who had previously bunkered around their twin ranged attackers. Phoebe's presence failed to replicate their previous strength but broadened their abilities. In the weeks since gaining their new members, the team had been working on strategies that were less specialised and more adaptive and versatile.

Hannah stepped off the roof, dropping down lightly to rejoin the others.

“He isn’t as much of a threat in this environment as he was when we had to chase him through those mangroves,” Hannah said. “Did you hear how loud he called out? He’s trying to draw the other team to our location.”

In another part of the ruined town, Beth Cavendish and her team moved with the same caution as Rick's team did. Beth was widely known as both team leader and team healer, but it was her dangerous mix of wide-area afflictions and control powers that made her a true threat.

Their own archer, Emily, was likewise scouting from a rooftop vantage, but the steep slope made that tricky. The team was slowly moving uphill in search of visual and tactical advantage. Emily was a celestine with fair skin and a gold pixie cut that matched her eyes. She wore a simple cap to keep the sun from reflecting off her hair and giving away her position.

Their team was only four, compared to five each for the others and they were being appropriately cautious. Emily moved carefully down from her hidden vantage, returning to the team.

“I have at least a direction from Asano calling out,” she said. “Obviously, he wants to lure us into the other team and clean up whoever’s left. Do we scout it out and wait, or avoid it completely?”

“Let them thin each other out,” Beth said. “Jason’s team has his voice communication ability, so they have more tactical flexibility. We stay hidden and keep going for the high ground. We wait for the others to clash and then move.”

“Isn’t that what everyone is going to do?” Niko asked. Niko Tomich was from the smoulder race, with dark skin and burning red eyes. Niko used fire and iron powers to deal heavy damage in melee or combine damage and control powers at mid-range, making him the team's most versatile striker.

“Jason’s team is going to be more active,” Beth said. “Their defender is mobility-based and short on powers, where Rick's team has Kettering and we have Hudson. We're both stronger than his group at suffering an attack, while Humphrey is as strong an initiator as you could ask for. They'll try and catch us at a bad moment and make the most of it.”

Hudson was a huge, comic book character of a man and the guardian of Beth's team. He wielded earth powers and, like Clive, had a racial gift evolution that moved his aptitude from special attacks to another ability type. In Hudson's case, it was conjuration, allowing him to conjure up stone weapons, shields, walls and other objects to protect his team.

As Beth predicted, the three teams were slow and careful as they moved about the ruined town. Jason's team made various attempts to bait one of their opponents into an ill-considered attack without success before regrouping to discuss the next move.

"Both teams are being extremely cautious," Humphrey said. "They aren't willing to risk extending themselves because they know they will do better defending from readiness. Everyone is waiting for an accident or a mistake that turns the tables, letting them swoop in and clean up the other teams."

"So what do we do?" Neil asked.

"Our best bet is to strike first," Sophie said. "For both of their teams, if we can overwhelm the key defender, it opens up the rest of the team to our attacks. We load up Humphrey with powers and use that to punch through their strongest front-liner and clean up the rest."

"Initiating a straight-up confrontation will cost us in the long run," Humphrey said. "Even if the other team doesn't arrive in time to pincer us against the group we're already fighting, they'll be fresh and we'll be hurt when they do turn up."

"Hunkering down fits the other teams better than it does us, though," Clive said. "Our core strategy is offensive, relying on mobility and power. We're better off pitting our strengths against their strengths than our weaknesses against their, uh, mediums."

"Their mediums?" Neil asked.

"Yes, their mediums," Clive said emphatically. "I said it and I'll stand by it."

Jason chuckled, shaking his head.

"You're right, Clive," he said. "These aren't teams we can beat with anything but our best. Humphrey had it right, too. If we want to catch them out of position, it has to be when they're moving to capitalise on a mistake."

"What are you suggesting?" Humphrey asked.

"I'm suggesting we make the mistake that they're both looking for. They're both waiting for someone else to get in a fight, so we'll get in one and we'll ambush them as they rush to swoop in. I found a good spot when I was roaming around, earlier. You're good for one of those illusion rituals you were telling me about, right Clive?"

"In field conditions?" Clive said. "If you don't want any old perception power to see through it, I can't do any better than a blank wall."

"That's fine," Jason said. "We just need them to think there's only one entrance, so we can slip out as they slip in."

"So, who will we be fighting?" Sophie asked.

"Each other, obviously," Jason said.

Emily tilted her head, listening.

“Did you hear that?”

Beth gestured for silence. Soon after they heard the noise of an explosive ability triggering.

“They found each other?” Hudson asked.

“It might be a ruse to flush us out,” Beth said. “Move slow and quiet; we wait to see if it keeps going.”

They moved forward at a cautious pace, Emily scouting the path to each new piece of cover before they took it. As they drew closer to the noise, they could hear a fight in full swing, with abilities going off and multiple weapons clashing.

“Alright,” Beth said. “Pick up the pace, but not too much. We want to get there once they’ve spent themselves on each other.”

They accelerated their way along the path, Emily scouting ahead again as they narrowed in on the continuing sounds of combat. As they drew closer, Emily gestured for them to stop. She came back and gathered with the rest, hidden beneath a crumbling wall. “The noise is coming from inside the hill,” Emily said. “There’s a collapsed building that exposed the tunnel access. I caught a glimpse of fighting inside, but didn’t push my luck.”

“Any other entrances?” Beth asked.

“I can’t rule it out, but not that I saw,” Emily said. “My guess would be one of the teams spotted the other going in and moved on them.”

“Alright,” Beth said. “We go with our standard, three-stage assault pattern. Control powers on any loose threats; be sure and call your targets. This means you, Niko. Then we blanket the fight with area attacks and mop up whoever’s still got fight in them. When you’re ready, Hudson.”

Hudson nodded as his body took on the colour of the desert stone, flesh transmuting into living rock. He then broke out of hiding, the rest of the team on his heels. They dashed up the slope to the shattered building and into the tunnel, balancing haste and care as they moved through the rubble. The tunnel was around a dozen metres long, beyond which it opened into darkness punctuated by flashes of magical light. They surged forward, catching glimpses of figures clashing. It looked like several normal-sized figures against one that dwarfed even Hudson.

“Wait!” Beth called out and they all stopped. “Plug the Hole!”

Reacting without question, Hudson held a hand out ahead of them and a slab of desert stone rose up to seal the end of the tunnel and close them off from the room.

“What is it?” Hudson asked afterwards.

“They were summons,” Beth said. “Back out, now.”

They started heading back down the tunnel when an arrow flew into the tunnel. It came in at an angle, striking the wall but not losing momentum as it ricocheted. Instead, the arrow duplicated, two arrows now zipping down the tunnel at different angles. They kept bouncing and multiplying as they zigzagged down the tunnel, the confines of the tunnel letting them bounce their way into a storm of arrows. Hudson acted quickly, placing another wall between them and the exit, boxing them in from both ends but shielding them from the arrow attack.

“That’s both my wall abilities,” Hudson said. “I won’t have them again for a while.”

“You did well,” Beth said and pointed to the newer wall. “That’s your shatter-stone wall, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then see if you can’t clear us a path with it. Break us out of here.”

Hudson walked from the front of his team to the back. The first wall he had created was the strongest; a simple wall conjuration power from his fortress essence called bulwark. The second power was called shatter—stone wall and could turn defence into offence. He snapped his fingers and the wall exploded away from him in a wave of sharp, stone shards, peppering Rick and Dustin who were on the other side.

The cousins were on opposing teams but filled similar roles. They were both huge, shielding their respective teams with the support of their elemental powers. Hudson had transformed himself into stone, while Dustin was clad in armour forged entirely of ice. Shards of the exploding wall had dug into it, without penetrating.

Standing next to Dustin, Rick also had hefty armour but without the complete coverage that Dustin enjoyed. He avoided most of the damage but still suffered some cuts and scrapes that he was ignoring. As the two teams spotted one another, Beth was already chanting a spell.

“Let venom drift on the breeze.”

She opened her mouth wide and flower petals started streaming out of it and up the tunnel. They were lotus petals, dark green, purple and black. They swept out of the tunnel on a wash of air, blowing past her teammates without incident yet adhering to the enemy team. Wherever they landed on flesh they swiftly dissolved into the skin.

Before the effects of the petals could be seen, Niko stepped forward and exhaled a cone of fire like a dragon. Between the mysterious petals and the roaring flame, the momentum of Rick’s team was completely halted.

“Hudson,” Beth called out and a moment later, a stone block rose up under their feet. It carried them along the tunnel like a raft in a quick current, the ground rippling like water as they passed. Hudson stood at the front, conjuring a huge stone shield as they barrelled out of the tunnel.

Where the stone block carried Beth’s team, the hard, dry earth became soft and unsteady. As they emerged from the tunnel, Rick and Dustin were forced back as the rippling ground left them with unsure footing.

From a hidden vantage, Jason’s team looked on. Humphrey tapped Clive on the shoulder just as the stone raft emerged from the tunnel and Clive snapped his fingers. The magic rune that appeared went unseen under the raft, but exploded upwards, nonetheless. The stone block absorbed most of the force but shattered into pieces, bursting upwards like a geyser.

Beth and Emily were sent flying by the power of the explosion, cut and bludgeoned by chunks of stone. Hudson and Niko had been held in place by their protective powers, their conditions reflecting the strength of those powers. Niko staggered, injured and disoriented while Hudson was entirely unharmed. He looked around, taking stock of Rick’s team.

Rick himself looked singed but was functionally uninjured, although he felt woozy from the poison petals that had found their way onto his exposed hands and face. Dustin was standing strong, as was his ice armour. It was pushing out the stone shards from the wall explosion and sealing over the cracks. There was some melting from the fire breath, but that was likewise recovering in short order.

Phoebe was unarmoured and had been right behind Rick and Dustin, ready to move down the tunnel before they were pushed back. She had moved to use Dustin as a shield from the fire breath but had been subjected to the bulk of the poison petals. She had already dashed backwards, holding a hand out, palm up. Droplets of black, purple and green liquid started falling upwards from her palm, collecting in a small orb floating over her hand.

As Phoebe was purging the poison from herself, the last members of her team were already going to work. The elf sisters had been well back, avoiding the area attacks. Claire was purging the poison from Rick with a spell as Hannah nocked an arrow to her bow. The arrowhead was glowing, the light rapidly increasing in intensity until it started strobing. Aiming it at Beth, still prone from the explosion.

Things were happening all at once as chaos ruled the battlefield. Phoebe gestured with her hand and the poison orb flew at Emily, the enemy archer who, like Beth, was still sprawled on the ground.

Hudson had seen Hannah readying the arrow and moved to get in its path before it was loosed but Dustin intercepted him. Rick and Niko moved on each other; Rick already holding a sword as a huge iron hammer appeared in Niko's hands. Niko started growing visibly larger and the crude hammer grew with him. Even the handle was made of dark iron, which started to glow with heat.

Hannah released the arrow at Beth, only for Hudson to appear in her place while she appeared where he had just been standing. The glowing arrow tore a chunk out of Hudson's torso, which crumbled off him in stony fragments. Dustin, suddenly finding Beth in front of him, conjured a hatchet of ice in each hand and started swinging.

Beth activated an ability she shared with Sophie called between the raindrops. She had obtained it through the water essence instead of the swift essence but it was functionally the same. Her spatial awareness and reflexes took a leap forward at the cost of rapidly consuming stamina and mana which was worth it to escape Dustin's attacks.

After throwing the poison orb, Phoebe was moving before it even struck. Emily held out a hand into which an arrow appeared, the tip glowing. As the poison orb struck her, she jabbed the arrow into the ground. There was a shock wave, launching Phoebe backwards and Emily herself into the air. She was unharmed by her own power, even using the momentum to flip backwards and land on her feet. She was immediately woozy, however, as the poison orb took effect.

From their vantage point, Jason's team watched the conflict unfold.

"Things are stabilising," Humphrey said. "It's time to join in, make things messy again. Everyone knows what to do."

The team nodded and Humphrey looked up, teleporting high into the sky.

Chapter 143: The Second-Best Iron Ranker

After the initial chaos, the two clashing teams were starting to get their bearings. This was the moment that winged death plunged out of the sky in the form of Humphrey Geller. Careening downwards with his dive bomb special attack, wings splayed out behind him, his powers were amplified by both Clive and Neil. A circle of magical runes floated around him and his sword glowed with light. He was twice his normal size, with an attendant increase in strength from Neil's giant's might spell.

Humphrey had a sword pointed down in a reverse, double-fisted grip. Hudson was still prone from his switch-teleport with Beth when Humphrey landed with literally earth-shattering force as his blade smashed into Hudson, smashing off chunks of his stone body. The blade of Humphrey's sword found the exact spot where Hudson had just been injured, imparting all the power of multiple buffs, the massive fall and two of Humphrey's special attacks combined.

Almost any iron-ranker would have died from that single blow alone, but Hudson was just any iron ranker. More than half of his torso and one arm were just gone, shattered into stone dust. He was still massively injured and lying prone as Humphrey stood up from the crouch he had landed in, still almost double his normal height from Neil's spell. He lifted up his sword and brought it down again. Hudson lifted his remaining arm and a stone shield appeared to intercept the attack.

The incredible impact of Humphrey's entry to the battlefield drew all eyes as the rest of his team started emerging, unnoticed. Clive had a large staff, from which he fired a bolt of magic at the elf sisters. Claire and Hannah were largely separated from the battle, leaving them free to heal and offer ranged support, respectively.

Neil also stepped out with Clive but didn't act, instead, making himself ready to intercede with his abilities at need. A third team member, Onslow the rune tortoise, was not a born ambusher and was sedately emerging from cover behind them.

The blast from Clive's staff crackled over Claire's shield, dissipating without any effect beyond drawing the attention of the two elves. The sisters failed to realise that this was the point as they turned to face Clive and Neil and away from their shadows, thrown onto the ground by the bright sun. With Jason's well-honed aura control, they failed to notice his dark figure rise up from Claire's own shadow.

Claire fired a blast from a wand as Hannah launched an arrow that caught fire in flight. Both Clive and Neil had the same mana shield power as Claire, the attacks striking

their invisible shields. Mana shield was a power that each of them gained from different essences but the effects were the same, negating attacks at the cost of mana.

The weaknesses were also the same, however, not impeding non-attacks, or attacks made from inside their sphere. It was a weakness that had cost Claire before, with Jason's leeches, and it was about to cost her again. Standing behind her, Jason slashed his hand on the razor in his wristband and reached inside Claire's shield.

Leeches spilled out over her, prompting startling shrieks that had her sister spinning around to see what happened. Jason pointed his arm at Hannah, who was likewise sprayed with leeches. Both sisters wore a coat of toothy leeches and Team Colin went to work.

Hudson's switch teleport had moved her out of the path of an arrow but placed her squarely in front of Dustin and his ice hatchets. Her between the raindrops power let her avoid his attack and escape his immediate reach but not his attack range. He started throwing ice spikes, forcing her to keep her attention on him and not the battlefield.

She had no time to assess her team's condition, let alone direct them as she was used to. From the moment Rick's team had boxed her in, through their breakaway being aborted by whatever had blown up Hudson's stone raft, she had been on the back foot.

Beth's archer, Emily, was likewise under pressure. She was staging a fighting retreat as she was pursued relentlessly by the swift and powerful Phoebe Geller. Affected by the poison orb Phoebe had used on her, Emily landed arrows on Phoebe but only inflicted minor injuries. Phoebe wasn't deterred, slowly but surely closing the gap.

In the meantime, Humphrey was still pounding away at Beth's front-liner, Hudson. Hudson was very much at his limits, scrambling on the ground and conjuring shield after shield for Humphrey to smash through. Despite his buffs, Humphrey was finding Hudson frustratingly difficult to finish off. His size buff had worn off, reducing Humphrey to normal proportions, but he didn't relent.

The last member of Beth's team was Niko, using his fire and iron powers to clash with Rick Geller. Niko's powers included a size buff he could use on himself, but the extra space he occupied was proving more of a detriment than the strength was an asset. Knee deep in mud, against a swarm of leeches, Rick wasn't much of a fighter, but this was open ground. With free footing and a large, singular enemy, Rick was a horror to engage in melee; an avatar of speed and power whose attacks were as potent as they were relentless.

Of the fourteen combatants on the field, none of them were bad, but Rick was the leader of his team for a reason. No one would accuse Niko of lacking as an adventurer,

but Rick simply outclassed him. He unleashed on Niko all the frustration of setback after setback his team had suffered, losing not just team members, but family. Rick was relentless and overpowering, his sword finding Niko again and again, leaving Niko stumbling back, rapidly accruing injuries.

Beth bought herself time by making use of Dustin's own power. One of her quick attack spells was called water cutter, which fired a beam of water hard and tight enough to cut through at least non-magical metal. In between ice spike, she fired it directly into Dustin's face. It didn't fully penetrate his icy helmet, but the water froze over the front of it from the cold of his armour, blinding him with an opaque sheet of ice.

Dustin wasn't worried as she smashed the ice away with a fist, knowing Beth lacked the powers to harm him in the brief moment he took to clear his vision. Attacking was not the reason she had bought that time, however, which she took to scan the battlefield.

She saw her team members scattered and on the back foot. They were about to be wiped out and she knew she had to intervene, chanting a spell as Dustin cleared off the obscuring ice. He threw an ice spike at her but she swayed out of its path and continued her incantation.

"Cool waters be the crucible of deliverance, bringing the deserving into the chrysalis of peace and rebirth."

Just as Dustin reached her, giant, magical lotus flowers appeared around Beth, Emily and Niko, completely enveloping them. Beth didn't complete her spell in time to save Hudson, who had finally been finished off by Humphrey. The people attacking the three now hidden away inside the lotuses found their attacks bouncing harmlessly off.

"They can't do anything from inside there but we can't hurt them either," Humphrey communicated through the group chat. "Go for Rick's team."

Jason's sneak attack had devastated the elf sisters, who were thrashing on the ground under piles of bloody leeches. Sophie, yet to make an appearance, suddenly launched a sneak attack at Phoebe who was at a loss in front of the lotus-shrouded Emily. She dodged the sneak attack, dancing away to create distance and the women squared off.

"You should have Asano work on your aura retraction," Phoebe said. "His is practically imperceptible, while yours just gave you away."

"Sneaking is really his area," Sophie said. "I'm more about the punching and you don't need an aura for that."

They clashed in a series of strikes before one of Phoebe's special attacks blasted them apart, both women landing nimbly.

"You made a mistake even coming for me," Phoebe said. "If you'd gone for Beth, she wouldn't have shielded her team."

"But then we'd have to fight both teams," Sophie said with a malevolent grin as Phoebe's eyes went wide with realisation.

"Humphrey knows Beth's abilities," she said. "He predicted what she'd do."

"Humphrey's a good guy and wouldn't say it," Sophie said, "but I think he's sick of being called the second-best iron-ranker."

Phoebe glanced around the battle. The elf sisters weren't coming back from their predicament but Rick and Dustin had regrouped to take on Humphrey. Jason stepped out of a nearby shadow.

"It's nice that you made a friend but you're meant to be fighting her," he told Sophie.

"I'm new at this," Sophie said. "I was waiting for a big strong man to save me."

"Is that right?" he asked.

"It is," Sophie said. "If you could go get Humphrey, that would be great."

"Well, that's just hurtful," Jason said.

"You know I'm still here, right?" Phoebe said.

"I suppose we should deal with you," Jason said.

"Oh, you're going to deal with me, are you?"

"That's the plan," Jason said. "Keep her busy would you, Wexler?"

Sophie launched into the attack before he finished talking, Phoebe deftly defending. Jason looked at Phoebe.

"Bleed for me."

Blood started running from Phoebe's eyes and nose as he cast another spell.

"Carry the mark of your transgressions."

Phoebe was distracted as a sigil seared itself onto her face, taking a fist to the ribs from Sophie.

"Your fate is to suffer."

"You have some nasty damn spells," Phoebe said, still clashing with Sophie. Suddenly she broke free and lunged at Jason. As she moved, she saw him throw something at the ground and she found herself shrouded in murky darkness. It wasn't full darkness as she could see shapes moving in the strange zone of shadows. She recognised the effect as one of his throwing darts and knew it only covered a small area. Making an immediate break for the outside, she felt a light slice on her arm as she emerged into the light.

Fully aware of what Jason's powers could do, Phoebe held her hand out to purge the toxins, the way she had earlier by gathering them into an orb. Sophie didn't give her the chance, forcing her to defend against a renewed series of attacks. In their initial clash, Phoebe had the advantage. Sophie had the edge in fighting technique, but Phoebe had more powers and more experience using them. The tables were turned as Phoebe needed to get away and cleanse herself before Jason's afflictions overwhelmed her. While Phoebe was stronger, though, Sophie's powers combined defence with blistering speed. She wouldn't be able to take down Sophie quickly or outpace her and escape.

While Sophie and Jason confronted Phoebe, Rick and Dustin regrouped as their opponents were both closed off in the lotuses. Instead, they took on Humphrey, fresh from finishing Hudson. All else being equal, Humphrey and Rick were a good match with quite similar combat styles. The addition of Dustin helped Rick but Humphrey had Clive, Neil and the finally emerged Onslow the rune tortoise to back him up.

Neil's ability to buff and heal was valuable, but not difficult to use. What had arrested the attention of Rufus Remore was Neil's shielding powers. The shield abilities that he could use on allies lasted only moments and would end after absorbing only a single attack. Without good judgement and timing, both could be easily wasted, leaving them unavailable until they came off cooldown again. The ability burst shield blasted away anyone nearby when the shield intercepted an attack. The other ability, absorbing shield, replenished the mana of the shielded person. The more damage that was prevented, the more mana was restored.

Using the voice chat, Neil offered to reapply the size-growth power but Humphrey refused, not making Niko's mistake. Clive refreshed his buffs, the rune circle that triggered effects when attacked and the damage-reflecting damage buff, mantle of retribution. Neil did refresh his other buff power, armour of renewal, which reduced damage taken and gave healing over time.

Humphrey clashed with Dustin and Rick. The two opponents should have been pressuring him but Humphrey had spent weeks discovering his limits under the protection of Clive and Neil. He left openings so he could make attacks, trusting Neil's shielding and healing, while letting Clive's retributive effects trigger. Clive offered ranged support, alternate staff blasts with using his own mana to recharge Onslow's shell powers.

The three on two was disadvantageous to Rick and Dustin, but they were holding on. They had also been training hard and Dustin used his ice powers to protect Rick and set up counters. Powerful attacks from Humphrey found his sword hitting a suddenly appearing ice wall that exploded into razor shards that slashed at him like knives. Blasts of

icy air knocked him away and slowed his reflexes with cold debuffs. Humphrey fainted against Rick to strike out at Dustin, only for Dustin to be replaced with an ice clone as he teleported a short distance away. The ice clone shattered under the attack, once again peppering Humphrey with ice razors.

It was not enough as Humphrey pushed them further and further onto the back foot, their attacks either shielded or healed by Neil's life bolt spell. It was clear that if nothing changed, they would inevitably lose out.

"Go for the healer," Rick barked and Dustin disengaged, Humphrey not trying to stop him. Dustin charged at Clive and Neil as Humphrey used Rick's distraction to catch him square in the chest with a kick, sending him staggering back. To Rick's surprise, instead of pushing the advantage, Humphrey looked up at the sky and he teleported away.

Clive looked up at Humphrey, more than a hundred metres in the air, then down at the charging Dustin. He smiled and chanted a spell.

"Exchange your fates."

Suddenly Humphrey was standing where Dustin had been charging Clive. Rick looked over in confusion, then up at the sky as a sound grew louder and louder. Dustin's scream came to an end at the same time his fall did.

Rick's team were effectively done. The sisters had succumbed to Colin while Phoebe was still alive but too debilitated to fight, leaving Rick as the only active combatant. Humphrey turned back to face him but Clive's vision power could see the magic of the lotus shells was about to end and warned the team.

Humphrey directed the team to quickly gather, which didn't take long. He was already close to the Clive and Neil, while Jason appeared from a nearby shadow. Sophie moved so fast it looked like she was skimming above the ground instead of running.

Inside her lotus shell, Beth had no idea what awaited her outside. She would have to rely on quick actions and quicker thinking when her spell dropped. Losing Hudson was a blow, but Niko and Emily would be fully healed, with refreshed mana and stamina. She hoped Humphrey and Rick's teams had taken the time to tear each other apart, which would allow her team to emerge and mop up.

The lotus shell dropped and her eyes fell immediately on Humphrey's team. They looked unharmed but they were gathered together in an easy clump. She cast a spell, eager to get it off before they reacted to the shells dropping and scattered.

"Steelcutter thorns, burst forth and make the land your own."

Thorny vines erupted from the hard earth, even splitting rock as they emerged, completely encapsulating Jason's team. Sharp thorns dug into them, even piercing

Humphrey's conjured dragon-scale armour. They didn't penetrate far, but they were all bound such that any movement would cause the thorns to dig into them. As soon as the thorns started growing, Beth was moving in their direction. Emily and Niko were likewise setting themselves up to launch attacks the moment the thorns no longer obscured Jason's team.

"Clive and Neil, go," Humphrey said through the voice chat.

Not needing to move to cast spells, Neil and Clive both started chanting lengthy incantations. It was enough time that Beth was able to rush to the edge of the thorns and chant her own spell. On completion, she opened her mouth, from which streamed a wave of green spores, flooded over the field of thorns.

They all started getting messages from Jason's interface power.

-
- Spell [Spore Cloud] has inflicted [Spore Toxin] on you.
 - You have resisted [Spore Cloud].
 - [Spore Cloud] does not take effect.
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
-

Stuck in the cloud, the messages kept repeating. Only Jason resisted all the spores, but Sophie's aura helped the others resist many of them. Jason used his Feast of Absolution on Clive and Neil to cleanse them as they chanted their spells.

Neil completed his and in the air above the thorns, and ornate water fountain appeared, floating in the air. It sprayed water down over the people in the thorn field, healing their wounds.

-
- Spell [Fountain of Life] is healing you over time.
-

Shortly after, Clive completed his spell. High in the sky, a magical light traced out the shape of a huge eye in red and gold light.

-
- You have entered a zone affected by the [Eye of Karma]. When you suffer damage, the originator of that damage will also suffer damage.
-

"NOW!" Humphrey yelled and the whole team started pushing themselves into the thorns. The floating fountain constantly healed them even as the thorns injured them. Beth shrieked as the retributive damage of five people being pierced all over their body tore her flesh to ribbons. When she died, the thorns withered, leaving the fountain to heal them of any remaining damage.

As the thorns withered, a hail of arrows fell from the sky and fire breath washed over them as Emily took the chance to strike. It was too little, too late, though, with the fountain still healing them. With their team outnumbering the survivors of both the others combined, the outcome was inevitable. Rick and Niko formed a temporary alliance but were overpowered by Humphrey, Sophie, Neil and Clive.

Jason, meanwhile, hounded Emily. Unlike with a normal pursuer, she never knew which shadow he would appear from and quickly realised running was pointless. Instead, she made herself ready to pepper him with arrows if he emerged. In the end, he baited her. When he appeared from the shadows she fired her strongest special attack while creating distance backing right into a waiting mass of leeches.

The control room of the mirage chamber had extra platforms installed to accommodate fourteen people. The participants all got up and stretched. Their real bodies had been lying comfortably, yet they all felt exhausted.

Beth moved over to Humphrey, shaking his hand.

“You completely anticipated me,” she told him. “It was a good win.”

“That’s the disadvantage of being the best adventurer in the city,” he told her, unable to hide his victorious smile. “Everyone’s paying attention to your abilities.”

“That was very good,” Danielle said, standing next to the control panel.

“I agree,” Emir said, standing next to her. “You will all have a good chance in my little contest.”

“When are you going to fill in some more details about that?” Jason asked.

“Only once your competition has arrived in the city,” Emir said. “That should be any day, now.”

Chapter 144:

Arrival

“You can begin, candidate Wexler,” Vincent said. Sophie nodded and stepped off the road and into the field of crops taller than she was.

“There were nine grass darters reported,” Vincent said to the other candidates. “While candidate Wexler chases them down, we will have time to discuss the remainder of the day’s notices. Those of you who have yet to demonstrate your aptitude to a satisfactory level should be looking to volunteer...”

He trailed off and looked to the crops, where Sophie emerged, struggling to carry four dead beetles, the size of small dogs. The group watched as she dumped them onto the road, each having a fist-sized hole in its carapace.

“According to the Magic Society listing,” Sophie said, “the shells of these things are pretty valuable. You said you knew harvesting rituals, right, Clay?”

“Uh, yes,” Clay said. “Were they already dead?”

“If they were already dead, they’d be rainbow smoke already,” Sophie said. “Just harvest this lot and we’ll go even split. I’ll go pick up some more.”

“How did you catch them so fast?” another candidate asked.

“I think these ones are duds,” Sophie said. “The Magic Society listing said they were fast, but these seemed a bit sluggish. Can’t hide their auras, either, so my perception power makes them easy to find.”

Sophie ducked back into the field.

“I wouldn’t put much stock in what candidate Wexler considers slow,” Vincent advised the other candidates. “Her perspective is somewhat skewed.”

At the marshalling yard, Jason and Belinda were part of the crowd waiting for the return of Sophie’s assessment group. It was the first Adventure Society intake since the expedition, the last one having been cancelled in the wake of that disaster and the incursion of the inquiry team. For this assessment, Vincent had been paired up with a member of that team who mostly watched in silence. It was also a smaller group than usual, with families suddenly more wary about placing their young people in the path of potential harm.

“She’ll pass, right?” Belinda asked nervously.

“She should,” Jason said. “Vincent won’t just give her an easy pass but she’s better than I was when I took my assessment.”

“She’s better than you are now,” Neil said. Their whole team was waiting for her in solidarity.

“I’ll have you know, people find me very scary,” Jason said.

“You’re wearing a pink shirt with tropical flower print,” Neil said.

“They could be poisonous flowers; you don’t know.”

“My concern is the member of the inquisition team they sent,” Humphrey said. “He’s meant to be assessing Vincent’s execution of the assessment, but he may just make them fail everyone as some kind of example.”

“They could have just sent Rufus for that,” Jason said. “He failed everyone when he ran the assessment.”

“He didn’t fail me,” Neil said.

“He did me,” Humphrey said.

“He failed me before it even started,” Jason said. “He wouldn’t let me go, told me not to bother because I was definitely going to fail.”

“Was he right?” Clive asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Jason said. “A few weeks earlier I was assistant manager at an office supply store.”

“A what store?” Belinda asked.

“Office supplies,” Jason said. “The Station-Eyrie, where we’re hawkish about your office supply needs.”

“Does this make sense to anyone?” Neil asked.

“We find it best to just let him go and not ask questions.”

“I am curious about his world, though,” Belinda said.

“There are a lot of differences,” Jason said. “More pamphlets, for example. You go to an accommodation and they’ll have a stand of pamphlets for local attractions. I haven’t seen that here.”

“Pamphlets,” Neil said flatly.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “Folded pieces of paper with information printed on them. Do you not have them here? Maybe I should start a business. I could be a pamphlet mogul.”

“Is it too late to change teams?” Neil asked. “Someone must be looking for a healer.”

A wagon rolled its way into the marshalling yard, Adventure Society candidates climbing out as it came to a stop. After a few words from Vincent they broke off to meet with their families, some looking confident, others morose. Vincent exchanged a brief chat with the inquiry official before following Sophie over to their group.

“How do you think you did?” Belinda asked, giving Sophie a greeting hug.

“You’ll have to ask this guy,” Sophie said, jabbing a thumb in Vincent’s direction.

“We’ll make our assessment reports today and final results go up tomorrow,” Vincent said. “I don’t think candidate Wexler has anything to be concerned about, though.”

“How was the inquiry official?” Humphrey asked.

“Tough but fair,” Vincent said. “He didn’t demand quite as high a standard as Rufus, but he certainly wasn’t going to tolerate the usual Greenstone standard.”

“So we can expect better adventurers from now on,” Clive said.

“For a while,” Vincent said. “How long it takes to fall back into old patterns, who knows. Adventure Society culture is set at the top and Elspeth Arella isn’t what I’d hoped she’d be.”

“My mother hates working with her,” Humphrey said. “She wasn’t happy Arella held onto her position, but this threat from the Builder pushes aside everything else for now.”

“Speaking of which,” Neil said, “did your mother say anything about Thadwick?”

“Not much,” Humphrey said. “After they caught him she watched the purging ritual herself. It seems to have extracted the star seed intact but Thadwick was fairly ravaged by the process. Last I heard, he hasn’t woken up from the healing, yet.”

“Thanks,” Neil said. “I hated being on his team but I’ve known him most of my life. He didn’t deserve that.”

“He tried to kill me that one time, so I kind of think he does,” Jason said. “The suffering part, at least; I’m glad he’s not dead.”

“To finish the job yourself?” Sophie posited.

“No,” Jason said. “Thalia Mercer knows her son’s a useless dimwit but she’d still kill me if I did. Then my friends would go after the Mercers and on and on. I’m going to do what I should have done when I first met the guy and let it go.”

“That’s a mature attitude,” Vincent said.

“I’m still going to make fun of him though,” Jason said. “A lot. That guy sucks.”

“That’s slightly less mature,” Vincent said, “but I’ll take it.”

Sophie vaulted over the gap between the Old City rooftops, sailing through the crisp morning air to land with delicacy and precision. The sun was only just peeking over the delta, beginning to banish the cold of night.

Gary was close behind Sophie, his leaps heavy and powerful compared to her light agility. Jason was a distant third, his cloak floating around him as it let him easily make the distance. On Jason’s heels was Humphrey, manifesting wings to cross the gap. Bringing

up the rear were Clive, Neil and Belinda, who balked at the jump, stopping at the edge of the roof.

“I can’t make that jump,” Neil said, breathing hard.

“Not with that attitude,” Gary called back.

“We don’t have movement powers,” Clive said. “I can only teleport other people.”

“Teleport me over, then,” Belinda said.

“Why should you get the teleport?” Neil asked. “You aren’t even an essence user, yet.”

“And I still have to do this awful training,” Belinda shot back. “That’s why I should get the teleport.”

“No one’s getting the teleport,” Clive said. He backed up, broke into a run and vaulted the gap, successfully reaching the other side.

“Why do I even need to do this?” Neil asked. “I don’t have any mobility powers.”

“Which makes it all the more important,” Humphrey said. “It means that if it comes down to it, the skills you’re developing now will be all you have to rely on. What happened to the man who was eager to train?”

“I want to train the things I’m good at.”

“That’s all well and good,” Gary said, “but it’s the things you aren’t good at that get you killed.”

Neil groaned, but moved for a run-up before barely clearing the gap.

“Not bad,” Gary said, thumping him heavily on the back.

That left only Belinda on the other rooftop, eyeing off the jump when an angry man climbed up from a window.

“Who’s jumping up and down on my roof, first thing in the bloody morning?”

The team looked at each other uncertainly, then Clive chanted a spell.

“Exchange your fates.”

Belinda and Neil switched position, bringing Belinda into the group and leaving Neil with the angry homeowner.

“LEG IT!” Jason yelled and they all started sprinting.

“Oh, come on,” Neil complained as he watched them go, then turned awkwardly to the man whose roof he was standing on.

“Well?” the man demanded.

“I’m with the Adventure Society,” Neil said.

“Is there a monster up here?” the man asked, casting a gaze around.

“Uh, no,” Neil admitted. “No, there isn’t.”

“Then get off my bloody roof!”

A crowd was gathered at a dock in the Old City port that had been completely cleared for the approaching ship.

“Why do you need me here for this?” Rufus asked. “I’m meant to be making final inspections of the annex site this morning before giving the go ahead to break ground.”

“You are still my contracted agent here,” Emir said. “That’s why you came here in the first place, which makes any other ventures of secondary concern.”

“Since when do you care about that?” Rufus asked.

“Since now,” Emir said. “Shut up and get ready to greet the people as they disembark.”

They had spotted the approaching ship from the cloud palace. Full of Emir’s recruited iron-rankers, it would normally have used the Adventure Society’s private dock, but that was currently claimed by the cloud palace. Instead, room had been made at the regular port.

“You realise you’ve thrown this whole port into chaos, right?” Rufus asked. “They weren’t expecting to have some gold-ranker come in and just claim a whole dock.”

“The entire point of being a gold-ranker is to have other people deal with all the mundane problems.”

“And here was me thinking it was to protect civilisation from monsters,” Rufus said. “That’s a life lesson, I guess.”

Rufus made his way through the gathering of Adventure Society officials, Emir’s staff, dockworkers, and adventurers, arriving dockside as the ship approached the dock. Rufus’ eyes went wide as he spotted a man on board with midnight skin and dark, curly hair tied back behind his head. The man spotted him to and launched off the boat, sailing through the air on a magical wind to land in front of Rufus.

“Hello, boy,” the man said.

“Hello Dad,” Rufus said. “What are you doing here?”

Chapter 145

Full Jason

As the boat was still moving into the dock, the aeronautical early arrival of Gabriel Remore drew quite a lot of attention. The curious crowd pressed in for only a moment, though, before he pressured them back with his gold-rank aura.

“I see you haven’t been working on subtlety while I’ve been away,” Rufus said.

“Gods, you sound like your mother. She told me I shouldn’t fly over.”

“She’s here, too?” Rufus asked, gaze moving from his father to the approaching ship.

“Oh, now you show some emotional investment,” Gabriel said.

“Maybe if you didn’t make everything about yourself,” Rufus said. “Flying over here in front of all these people. What were you thinking.”

“That I could comfort my precious son.”

“Then why didn’t you bring Mother?”

The mirth dropped off Gabriel’s face as he turned to look at the ship.

“She’s with the Hurins,” he said.

Rufus’ face was stricken.

“Farrah’s parents?” he asked feebly.

“They wanted to come.”

Rufus reeled on the spot. “I shouldn’t have... I should have brought her home straight away.”

“It’s alright,” Gabriel said, placing a comforting hand on his son’s shoulder. “I won’t say it wasn’t hard on them, because how could it not be. But those of us with adventurer children know that adventurers don’t always come home.”

“I was supposed to protect her.”

“You were supposed to lead her, and you did.”

Gabriel looked around at the gathered people watching them. He had already used his wind abilities to make their conversation private, but there was no shortage of onlookers.

“You’re right,” he said to his son. “I shouldn’t have jumped over like that.”

Rufus was bleary-eyed but gave his father a smile.

“If you didn’t make a spectacle of yourself, I’d suspect you of being some kind of shape-shifter.”

“That’s kind of hurtful.”

“You did an unscheduled fire-sword dance at my academy graduation,” Rufus said.

Gabriel chuckled.

“Your grandad gave me an earful for that one.”

Emir passed through the wind bubble keeping in the sound and gave Gabriel a welcoming hug.

“How was the trip, Gabe?”

“It was good,” Gabriel said.

“You know I could have had Hester portal you in,” Emir said.

“Arabelle wanted to take the long way,” Gabriel told him. “All those stops picking up the iron-rankers gave us the chance to see some new places. It was good for the Hurins.”

“With you, me and Arabelle here, you should have brought Cal, too,” Emir said. “Get the old team together for a reunion.”

“You know what he’s like,” Gabriel said. “If there’s no monsters worth fighting, he’s not interested. You couldn’t drag him into a low magic zone like this one.”

“He doesn’t change, does he?” Emir asked, glancing again at the boat. “They’ll be getting ready to disembark, soon. I’d best go greet all the tadpoles.”

Emir was in front of a gathered group of iron-rankers. Some sixty or so had been on the boat, with two more boats coming.

“Welcome to Greenstone,” Emir said. “My name is Emir Bahadir and I’d like thank you all personally for coming all this way in response to my contract. As to the specifics, there will be a large announcement meeting once all of the adventurers have arrived. In the meantime, I suggest you report your arrival to the local branch of the Adventure Society. I’ve arranged a number of carriages to take you all there directly, and they can help you find local accommodation.”

Adventurers didn’t have luggage, carrying their possessions in dimensional bags or dimensional space abilities. They were trained to travel light and with efficiency and were soon heading for the Island in a train of carriages. Not all of them took the offered ride, heading straight off to explore Old City or hanging around instead, hoping for some personal time with Emir.

Others were greeted by representatives of Greenstone’s nobility or other prominent families. Every other family in Greenstone envied the power and influence the Gellers held in other lands and leapt at the chance to make outside connections. They hoped that playing host to the next generation of leaders would get them a foot in the door of a larger world. This was reinforced by the Geller family itself, so sent representatives to collect certain people to which they had connections.

Emir sent most of those looking to make an early connection away, except for a young girl of only fifteen years, with dark skin and rainbow-coloured hair that fell back over her head in a series of tight braids.

“Ketis,” Emir greeted her warmly.

“Grandfather,” she said with a respectful nod.

“No hug for grandad?”

She gave him a hug after glancing around with the self-consciousness of her age.

“How was your trip?” he asked.

“The boat was so small,” she complained, drawing a laugh from Emir.

“Of course it was small after the cloud ship,” he said. “It’s good for you to broaden your perspective.”

“You don’t broaden your perspective by narrowing the ship,” she said sullenly and Emir laughed again.

“Did you enjoy travelling with Aunty Arabelle?”

She nodded.

“Alright,” he said. “Come along as I say hello. I have a present for you, later.”

They wandered over to where Rufus and his father were talking with three other people. Rufus’ mother, Arabelle, had even darker skin than her husband, her long hair dyed rainbow colours in the Vitesse style. Farrah’s parents, the Hurins, were fair-skinned, like their daughter had been. Emir knew that while they looked older than the Remores, Amelia and William Hurin were actually younger.

Of humble origins, they had become adventurers later in life. As young parents, they had stumbled upon the valuable potent essence. Instead of selling it for its considerable value, they kept it hidden as they worked to obtain more. By the time their daughter was old enough to use them, they had the more common fire and earth essences to go with it. It was only after their daughter found success as adventurers that she repaid the gift twice over and they, too became essence users.

Farrah’s parents had no interest in following their daughter into the Adventure Society. They were both bronze rank, having raised their abilities using the monster cores Farrah brought back from her adventures. Rufus and Gary had likewise contributed their own shares.

As Emir approached, Rufus was bowed before them, practically kneeling.

“I’m so sorry,” he told them.

“Please stop apologising,” Farrah’s mother, Amelia said. “Our daughter died as an adventurer, and she died proudly. You’re no more to blame than we are for giving her those essences in the first place.”

“We had an informal wake a couple of weeks ago,” Rufus said. “Now you’re here, I’ll arrange something more formal.”

The two sets of parents shared a glance over Rufus’ bowed head.

“You do that,” Farrah’s father, William said. “We’d appreciate it, son.”

In the cloud palace training hall, Humphrey and Sophie were clashing while Jason, Neil, Clive and Belinda rested in the observation area. Humphrey had his smaller conjured sword out, Sophie deflecting it with her fists.

“When I get my own essences,” Belinda told Clive, “I think I’ll prefer to fight at range, like you. Getting up close like that is really more Sophie’s area.”

“That can be tricky for a human,” Neil said. “Humans get more special attacks than anything else, unless you get a racial gift evolution early, like Clive. Mostly that means melee attacks. If you want range, then a bow essence would be a good choice. That’s the most reliable way to get ranged special attacks.”

“Or you could get an ability that lets you use skill books,” Clive said. “That way, you can gain whatever skills you need. The adept essence is a solid bet, in that case.”

“I looked at the bow essence, but decided against it,” Belinda said. “Adept is on my list, though.”

“You’re already picking out essences?” Neil asked.

“Clive let me look at the Magic Society essence listings,” Belinda said. “I’ve picked out a set I like the look of. They’re all common essences, so they shouldn’t be that hard to get.”

“You’ve made a decision?” Clive said. “What combination?”

“Magic, adept and trap,” she said.

“Magic and adept are popular essences, but not hard to find,” Clive said. “Trap is more of a niche selection. Mostly assassin and hunter types go for it; I think it’s an undervalued essence when it comes to monster hunting.”

“What’s the confluence essence for that?” Neil asked.

“Charlatan,” Belinda said with glee. “I was looking through the abilities it’s known to give and they sound fantastic.”

Neil and Clive shared a glance.

“Charlatan?” Neil asked.

“From recollection,” Clive said, “it’s a confluence more people avoid than seek out. Most would disagree with you on the value of the abilities it gives.”

“Then those people lack imagination,” Belinda said. “I looked through long lists of abilities. I don’t want to pick out some essences looking for fun, tricky abilities, only to end

up with a boring set of straightforward attacks. Ideally, I'd get one of those racial gift evolutions that means I'm not stuck shooting nine kinds of magic arrow."

"We fought a couple of people in the mirage chamber recently who might disagree," Neil said.

"Those people lost," Belinda said. "Maybe they would done better if they had more tricks in their pocket."

"Harsh," Jason said. "I have to agree with the value of having a few hidden surprises at the ready, though."

"As do I," Emir said as the elevating platform brought him up into the room. "Speaking of surprises, I believe you have something for me?"

Clive pushed himself out of the chair, took a heavy book from his storage space and handed it to Emir.

"Skill book. Way of the Reaper, form three."

"You aren't still holding out on me, are you?" Emir asked. "Jason told me you didn't take anything from that complex you found."

"I said no such thing," Jason said. "If you think back, you'll find I dodged the question. If I went telling high-rankers every time I found something interesting, they'd just keep taking them off me."

"Is that why you kept your and Miss Wexler's unusual combat style from me for so long?"

"I thought it was best if your interest in her was purely altruistic," Jason said. "It was her choice to tell you. She wanted to thank you for taking her in when you had no need to."

"My client is very interested in the origin of that fighting style," Emir said. "Once our business here is done, I suspect he will have an interest in tracing Miss Wexler's family history. Perhaps, once her indenture is done, she will be interested in that journey for herself."

"That's up to her," Jason said. "So, this granddaughter of yours has been learning the Way of the Reaper too?"

"My search has taken time and found many relics of the Order of the Reaper," Emir said. "That includes skill books. My granddaughter can use skill books and was very interested in practicing a lost style. I was reluctant, having only recovered books containing three of the five forms. In the end, she wore me down."

"Your client didn't want the books?" Clive asked.

"My client appreciates any relics I send his way and pays me appropriately, but I am only contracted for one item. We have found multiple copies of these skill books and had

some to spare, but only for three of the forms. We haven't found anything for the second or third."

"We found intact copies of forms one and three," Clive said. "We can't help you with a book for form two."

"I'm not so sure about that," Emir said. "My hope is that one will be recovered during the upcoming contest," Emir said. "I will share the details once the other boats arrive. Even if not, both you and Miss Wexler have knowledge of form two, do you not, Jason?"

"We do. We're grateful for all you've done for us, so we'd be happy to teach her what we can."

"That's excellent," Emir said. "You'll meet her soon. Have you met Rufus' parents, yet?"

"Not yet," Jason said. "Rufus and Gary have been with them and Farrah's parents since they arrived."

"Rufus had a request for you, for when you meet his father."

"Oh?" Jason asked.

"Rufus' father, Gabriel, likes to make a big first impression. He didn't tell Rufus he was coming, then made quite the entrance at the port."

"So I've heard," Jason said.

"Rufus requested that when you meet his father, you go what he referred to as 'full Jason,' whatever that means."

"Oh, we know what that means," Neil said.

"Yes, we do," Clive said.

"What are you two talking about?" Jason said.

"You questioned if I was even an elf, then accused me of being fat," Neil said.

"You claimed to have slept with my non-existent wife, then accused me of sleeping with your non-existent wife."

"Neil's an elf?" Belinda asked.

"Yes, I'm an elf!"

"You are quite hefty for an elf."

"My proportions are perfectly normal!"

"I see it now," Emir said. "This is exactly what Rufus was looking for."

"He had his landlady yell at me."