

## Chapter 66: A Stronger Weapon Than the One in Your Hand

Humphrey was returning to the family estate after completing a contract, muddy and spattered with monster blood. He was met by Phoebe, a distant cousin. Like him, she was iron rank but joined the Adventure Society more than half a year earlier.

The Geller family sprawled across continents. Although they shared a last name, Phoebe and Humphrey were barely related. They didn't even share an ethnicity, with her skin being darker and hair much lighter than Humphrey's. As was traditional for the Geller family, Phoebe had been sent to Greenstone for training and experience. Once she reached bronze-rank, she would return to her homeland.

"What is going on with that friend of yours?" Phoebe asked Humphrey.

"You mean, Jason?" Humphrey asked. "I've been busy with contracts, so I haven't seen him. Mother said was spending a lot of time in the mirage chamber."

"A lot of time is right," Phoebe said. "He's been in there almost all day, every day, for most of a week," Phoebe said. "He'll fight anyone who comes in; bronze rank, iron rank, he doesn't care. Your mother says its good experience for our people to face an affliction specialist."

"Is he winning?" Humphrey asked.

"Mostly he's losing," she said sharply. "People have a habit of dying after he's already been beaten, though. Those afflictions are nasty."

"I've seen him kill monsters with them," Humphrey said. "I'm not sure I want to see that on a person."

"I don't understand how he keeps going when he loses so much," Phoebe said. "That would really get to me."

"You learn more from a loss," Humphrey said. "I wouldn't bother trying to understand Jason, though. I think Mother is the only one who sees through him."

"He did manage a few unexpected victories," Phoebe said. "When the mirage chamber throws out a complicated environment he gets tricky to deal with."

“Oh?”

“He beat my brother.”

“He beat Rick?” Humphrey asked.

“Rick is like you,” she said. “Put the enemy in front of him and nothing at iron rank is going to survive. But the mirage arena put them in a ruined town. The post-surge, cleanout scenario, so monsters everywhere. He’d hit-and-run every time Rick was distracted.”

The illusion power of the mirage area could combine environments and enemies into many different scenarios. A post-surge cleanout was set in a town that had been overrun during a monster surge. It was a favourite of the Geller family trainers, due to the complex environment and constant threat of hidden monsters. Often it was used to train search-and-destroy missions, but it also made a dynamic arena for combat.

“I’m guessing Rick asked for a rematch,” Humphrey said.

“Straight away,” Phoebe said, “but your mother stepped in and took over and decided to make a demonstration of it. She must have been watching.”

“I think Jason fascinates her,” Humphrey said. “She likes to take people apart like puzzles, to see how they work. Jason is nothing if not puzzling.”

“She put out a notice for everyone on site to assemble in the viewing room in...”

She pulled out a pocket watch to check the time.

“...just under two hours. Enough time for you to take a shower first. You smell like swamp and dead monster. Why didn’t you use some crystal wash?”

“I ran out. It’s been hard to get a hold of lately,” Humphrey said.

“Actually, I noticed that too,” Phoebe said.

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The mirage area viewing room was laid out like a lecture theatre, and Geller family trainers would often use it as such. With tiered seats looking down on a large viewing window, trainers could talk while mirage arena images, live or recorded, were projected behind them. It was already half full when Humphrey arrived, with more people coming in behind him.

“Your mother tweaked the rematch,” Phoebe said as Humphrey took a seat next to her. “This time Rick will have his whole team.”

“All of them?” Humphrey asked. “Who does Jason have with him?”

“No one,” Phoebe said. “Although I suspect your mother’s hand will be firmly pressed down on the scale.”

“Rick has Claire on his team,” Humphrey said. “She’ll just cleanse all of Jason’s afflictions.”

“Your mother set the conditions of the match,” Phoebe said. “I’m not the one to complain to.”

“I’m going to go find her,” Humphrey said, standing up.

“Sit back down,” Phoebe scolded, putting a restraining hand on his arm. “Do you honestly think you can change her mind?”

Humphrey did as he was told and sat down.

“I never have before,” he said.

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“I’m not exactly sure what the point is,” Jason said. He was alone with Danielle Geller, in the control room of the mirage area. They were awaiting the arrival of Rick Geller and his team.

“The point,” Danielle said, “is to learn. That’s what we do here. We teach, and we learn. My family has spread across the world, but this is the place we first became adventurers. It’s where we still do.”

“I meant more specifically,” Jason said. “I’m not sure I can hold up against five of your family members long enough to make any kind of educational contribution.”

“When Rufus first described you to me, do you know what he said?”

“Rakishly handsome?”

Danielle chuckled.

“He told me that when you were all prisoners, you showed him what it meant to find something inside yourself you didn’t know was there. To do what didn’t seem possible.”

“He may not have been paying attention,” Jason said. “Mostly I freaked out and got hit with shovels.”

“Yet you took down Cressida Vane,” Danielle said. “I knew her, you know.”

“You did?” Jason asked. “Was she always massively overconfident? That’s what got her killed.”

"She was, actually, yes," Danielle said. "It doesn't surprise me at all that it killed her in the end."

"I've died seven times today, in your mirage arena," Jason said. "Maybe three dozen, this week. It feels real. The despair, the panic, the helplessness. It still comes, every time."

"Good," Danielle said. "I want to see what Rufus saw. I want to see you do the impossible. More importantly, I want the young members of my family to see it."

"And if I fail miserably?" Jason asked.

"Then perhaps you'll think twice before trying to make my son question the fundamental makeup of our society."

Jason laughed.

"Yeah, sorry about that," he said, sheepishly. "I have a way of climbing up on my high horse."

"My son has started asking questions that I'm not entirely sure I like," she said.

"Yes you do," Jason said with absolute confidence.

She chuckled again.

"Yes, I do," she acknowledged.

The door opened and Rick walked in. Like his sister, his skin was dark brown, his hair light brown. His build was more like Humphrey, tall and broad-shouldered. He led in four more people behind him.

Teams were not uncommon amongst adventurers, usually three to six members. Only in a relatively safe region like Greenstone was solitary operation commonplace.

Rick's team had an archetypal distribution of roles, with a couple of resilient front-liners, some damage specialists and a healer. Not every team could find a good healer, with even someone like Rufus yet to find a one. His experience with Anisa demonstrated that team dynamics were as much about the balance of personalities as the balance of powers.

Rick shook Jason's hand and introduced his team members. It was obvious to Jason that his demand for a rematch wasn't rooted in pride, but a drive to improve himself common to the Geller clan. He had been as surprised as anyone when Danielle set up Jason against his entire team.

Only three of the five were Gellers, the other two being a pair of twin elf sisters. Jason shook hands with each of them in turn. While Rick may not have been driven by pride, not everyone on his team was the same, and the largest member of the team squeezed Jason's hand brutally as he shook it.

"Ow," Jason said, cradling his hand after taking it back. "Strewth, mate. What was that for?"

"Jonah," Rick scolded. "What are you doing?"

"This idiot thinks he can take us one-on-five," the big guy said.

"Actually, that was my idea," Danielle said, drawing everyone's attention. She had faded into the background so well as they were making introductions that Jason suspected it was some kind of aura trick. Just a subtle rise in her aura suddenly made her the centre of attention. Jason had been working hard on his aura control but realised he still had a long way to go.

Most of the group looked at Danielle respectfully, but Jonah looked defiant.

"Do you really think this guy is better than all five of us?" he asked.

"It isn't about being better," Danielle said. "He may not have been training as long as you have, or used the carefully curated awakening stones you all did, but I've been watching him here in the mirage arena."

"You have?" Jason asked, looking disconcerted.

"I have," she said. "Jason might still be settling into his martial techniques, but he has completely learned a lesson that everyone here would do well to give more attention. So I set up this little match for everyone to see. I've queued up just the right scenario to make my point."

"Rigged the fight, you mean," Jonah asked.

"Oh, good," Jason said, letting out a relieved breath. "Just between us, I was a little worried."

Danielle chuckled.

"The scenario is a fugitive hunt. Rick, your team has two hours to find and capture or kill Jason. Jason, you need to avoid capture for the full duration, or incapacitate Rick's team."

"Not like likely," Jonah muttered.

"You have something to say, Jonah?" Danielle asked.

"I sure do," Jonah said, either not noticing or not caring about the warning in Danielle's voice. "I'm going to show this little no-name weed what it means to fight a Geller."

Rick punched him on the arm.

"Shut up, idiot. He's been in here fighting Gellers all week."

Danielle gave Rick an approving smile.

"One more thing," she said. "This scenario will be set during a monster surge."

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Danielle walked into the viewing room, striding up onto the platform in front of the viewing window, with a crystal rod in her hand. The room went quiet. No-one had the courage to still be talking when Danielle started speaking.

"The Geller name is a good one to have," Danielle said. "Each of you in this room either carries it or are the boon companions of those who do. It is a name that opens doors, garners respect. It is a name to be proud of."

She panned her gaze over the audience. Geller trainees, their companions, and a few of the instructors who trained them. She continued her speech.

"I was just reminded, however, that pride can be a danger. We are not made great because our name is great. Our name is great because we make it so. Every one who bears the Geller name has the responsibility to live up to it. We are born with this name and a lot more. It is our responsibility to spend our lives earning them."

She waved the rod in her hand at the viewing window, which blinked to life. It showed a common scene from the delta; muddy ground filled with tangled tree roots, the canopy overhead casting everything in shadow. Rick and his team trudged through the mud that sucked at their boots with every step.

"As instructors, we find some lessons take longer to sink in than others," Danielle said. "You are all filled the realisation of your new power. You feel strong, unbeatable, even. It can make you disrespect the forces outside of yourself as determinates of success and failure."

She glanced back as the team struggled along the wet ground. Hidden roots and unexpected deep patches on mud made for stumbling progress. The thick foliage above them forced them to rely on a magic lamp for light. It was an expensive one that would float over them without occupying a hand, but it filled the space around them with the dancing shadows of the trees.

“Your surroundings,” Danielle picked up, “can be a stronger weapon than the one in your hand. Monsters rarely spawn in training halls and fighting arenas. In most cases, you will be engaging them in their own environments. While you are watching, I want all of you to pay attention to this point. Who is using the environment, and how.”