

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.