

Chapter 131: What the Geller Name is Worth

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

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

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

“Good eye,” Clive said.

“I know a guy who grows it.”

“A herbalist or apothecary?”

“He’s more of a recreational enthusiast.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Clive turned to look at Rick.

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

Rick nodded absently, glancing at the door.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You have no idea.”

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

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

“Yeah,” Rick said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“How many is quite a few?”

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

“Seriously?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh, that’s not right,” Rick said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rick nodded, eyes clear and focused.

“What else can I do to help?”

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