

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.

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- 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].
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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.

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

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