

Chapter 67: This is What it Means to Fight Me

Jason moved comfortably through the marshy woods. His feet didn't sink into water or mud, while his eyes easily pierced the darkness. Clusters of scraggly trees and other obstacles were no bother; he could vanish into the ample shadows and appear on the far side. Despite being all an illusion, it felt completely real. The hot, heavy air, the tiny insects swarming around him. A small burst of aura projection sent them scattering.

A thick strand of webbing launched itself out of a shadow, striking the spot where Jason had been moments before. It was not the first such miss, as Jason's eyes could dig out the trap weaver's in the darkness. Even if they hit, the webs slid off. They could not adhere either to his essence ability cloak or the armour underneath.

➤ **Effect: Resistant to adhesive substances and abilities with adhesive effects.**

The woods were filled with trap weavers, leaving behind a maze of sticky threads as they attempted to ensnare Jason. He flashed through the shadows, dagger planting in the head of the giant spider. It dropped to the ground as he continued strolling through the woods.

In the viewing room, Danielle controlled the perspective of the viewing window with the rod in her hand. She used it to follow Rick and his team's journey through the dark, marshy woodlands.

Henry Geller threw out his hand as he chanted a quick spell.

"Fire Bolt."

Flame launched from Henry's fingers, missing the fleeting, shadowy figure to burn out as it hit a tree trunk. Hannah's arrow had come closer, but Jason's figure was gone before it too stuck harmlessly into a tree.

"Henry?" Rick called out.

"He jumps around too much," Henry said. "It's like he's everywhere."

Henry wielded magic of wind and fire, and they had been tracking Jason by reading his scent on the air. They had caught glimpses of him, but seen little more than shapes in the darkness.

The group continued searching the murky, woodland bog. Jonah was their bulwark, but his heavy armour and shield slowed him to a crawl. Rick was their other frontline fighter and he was coping better. His armour wasn't as heavy and his might essence gave him the strength to plough through the mud. His greatest problem was that his long, heavy sword was hard to swing among the trees.

Rick and Jonah, along with Henry, were all members of the Geller family. The two remaining team members were the elf twins, Hannah and Claire Adeah; an archer and the team healer. As the healer, Claire was always the most important team member to protect. Her ability to cleanse Jason's afflictions made it doubly true. For this reason, she was in the most guarded part of the formation as they made their sluggish way through the marsh.

"What's that?" Jonah called from the front. The others looked at he pointed out ahead. The trees grew closer together, and streamers of webbing, thick as an arm, were draped through them like party decorations. It wasn't any kind of pattern, instead wild and scattered. It was thickly laid out, to the point of being hard to find a passage through.

"Trap weavers," Hannah said. They had already encountered several, most of which had been pinned to trees by her arrows.

"Trap weavers are careful," Rick said. "This doesn't look careful."

"I think Asano might have provoked them," Henry said. "This whole area is riddled with his scent."

"I don't think going through that is a good idea," Jonah said.

"We have to," Rick said. "He hides, we chase; that's the game. If we refuse to go somewhere, he can just wait there and time us out."

"That's not a fair condition," Jonah said.

Hannah looked at him like he was an idiot.

"There's five of us," she said.

"I'm just saying," Jonah said sullenly.

"Hannah," Rick said. "Your eyes are the best. Find us the clearest path."

The webbing proved to be very widespread.

“How did he get trap weavers to do all this without getting caught by them?” Claire wondered.

“He’s tough to pin down,” Rick said. “He may need shadows to teleport, but he can keep doing it, over and over. In a place like this, he’s a ghost.”

As they headed into the web-strewn trees they were plunged into shadow, the canopy above them low, but thick. They were moving slower than ever as they picked their way through the webs.

“I don’t like this,” Henry said.

“We just need to get a good look at him,” Hannah countered. Her bow was always at the ready. She was not worried about the obstructions, prepared to fire from her short bow at a moment’s notice.

“Can you burn through these webs?” Rick asked Henry.

“Trap weaver webs don’t burn easily,” Henry said. “I’d blow through my mana and barely make a dent.”

Around them was eerie quiet. Only the buzzing of insects accompanied the squelching of their feet in the mud, so a sudden new sound arrested their attention.

The sound of feet pounding rapidly through mud came from somewhere in the distance. The sound stopped for a moment, then they heard panicked swearing and the sound started again from a different direction. They heard the wet slap of something landing in the mud and a startled yelp.

“He’s got monsters on him,” Rick barked at the others. “Go!”

They started surging over the marshy ground. Hannah had found them a path that was relatively solid and even Jonah powered forward in his heavy armour. What they found was an indentation in the mud.

Rick looked around, peering at every shadow.

“Hannah?” he asked. When there was no response, he glanced back.

“Hannah?”

The whole team craned their necks searching in every direction.

“She was right behind me,” Claire said. “We were all running, and…”

“Back the way we came,” Rick said decisively, and so they went. What they found, to their horror, was Hannah’s body, barely moved from where they had started running. Her throat was cut and she dangled macabrely from thick strands of webbing like a puppet on strings.

"It's not real," Rick told Claire, who was looking at her sister with a hand over her mouth, eyes shocked wide. He put a supportive hand on her shoulder.

"It's just illusion," he told her. "We've been through this before. Henry, do you have a scent?"

There was no answer, and they looked again. While they had been looking at Hannah's corpse, Henry had vanished. That left the two men in their heavy armour and the healer.

"How did he do that?" Jonah asked.

"He's going for the ones he can kill quick and quiet," Rick said. "The rest of us won't go out like that. Our armour and Claire's magic shield means he can't take us easily.

Suddenly blue light flared around Claire in the form of a bubble as objects struck it, three in quick succession. They were throwing knives, falling harmlessly into the mud after bouncing off the protective barrier.

"That way!" Jonah called out, but Rick grabbed his arm.

"He's baiting us," Rick said. "The way he baited the trap weavers into making all this mess. From now on, we go carefully."

"How do we find him now?" Jonah asked. "Henry and Hannah were our spotters."

"We've been dancing to his tune the whole time," Rick said. "Time to change the music. Use your shout."

"Are you sure?" Jonah asked. "You know what that'll do to the monsters."

"He took out our spotters," Rick said. "The best advantage we have now is a straight-up fight."

"I don't think he's suddenly going to step out for that," Jonah said.

"It's not us he'll be fighting," Rick said. "He might be able to dodge a handful of trap weavers, but look at all these webs. That's more than a handful. If they all go berserk, he'll have a harder time dealing with them than we will."

"Are you sure about that?" Claire asked.

"No," Rick said. "I'm open to alternatives."

The others shook their heads.

"Alright," Rick said. "Jonah shouts, then we fight off the monsters while we wait for them to flush him out."

Jonah nodded, then took a deep breath. Throwing back his head, he roared; a primal scream that blasted through the marsh like an explosion. As he fell silent, animal shrieks rose up in answer, echoing out what felt like miles. Rick grinned, hefting his heavy sword in readiness.

"Let's see how he... crap!"

Everything went dark as a thrown dagger shattered their floating lantern. Rick felt a sting on arm, as did Jonah moments later. Light bloomed, illuminating the area from a glowing orb over Claire's raised hand. They looked around, but Jason was already gone.

"Keep the orb up," Rick told Claire. "I know it uses your mana, but not that much and another lantern would be vulnerable."

She nodded, looking at the wounds on Jonah and Rick.

Jason had found gaps in their armour while they couldn't see to defend against him, but he had barely drawn blood. They were minor cuts, but Rick had warned them early that it was all Jason required. Claire extended an arm towards Rick and chanted a spell.

"Be made clean."

A glow of white-gold light glowed out from under Jonah's armour, and a black smoke arose from the gap where Jason's knife had cut. She did the same with Jonah.

"A poison and a curse each," Claire said. "All gone, now."

"His hit and run attacks have done all the damage they can," Rick said. "He can't quickly finish the rest of us, and now the trap weavers will flush him out. We move carefully, fend off the weavers that come for us, and either find his corpse or make it."

"Like this body?" a mocking voice asked. There was a lilting malevolence to it, like the speaker was slightly unhinged. They turned, seeing Jason's shadowy figure behind the dangling corpse of Hannah, still strung up on webs. It was their first clear look at him, although clear wasn't exactly the word. He looked halfway made of shadows, his cloak of darkness wrapped around him. The dark, flowing lines of his battle robe melded into the shadows

and his face was shrouded in the darkness of the hood. Even with the light of Claire's orb, he was hard to see standing in front of them.

Rick threw his massive sword. It spun through the air at Jason but buried itself in Hannah's body as he moved further behind it for cover. Rick held out his hand and the sword yanked itself from Hannah's corpse, flying back to Rick's hand.

Standing behind the dangling, macabre puppet that was the ravaged corpse of their companion, Jason's laughter was filled with sinister mirth.

"So much for camaraderie," he said.

"We're going to kill you, you sick prick!" Claire said to Jason, who laughed again. His response was to chant a spell, voice filled with malevolent relish.

"As your life was mine to reap, your death is mine to harvest."

A dim red light shone from Hannah's body, which was quickly devoured by Jason. As it did, Hannah's skin grew dry, pulling tight over her skeleton as if years were passing in moments. Only a desiccated husk remained in her blood-stained clothes.

Claire screamed out in anger, raising the wand in her hand. A bolt of white magical energy fired at Jason, tracking him through the air, but he stepped closer to the corpse which intercepted the attack. The withered body fell apart, tumbling piecemeal to the ground. Claire watched in horror as her sister's body crumbled into dried-up chunks, splattering into the mud. Then responsible, Jason, was already gone.

"You should be careful," his voice mocked them, first from one direction, then another. "I thought I had the spiders riled up, but you really went and did it."

Jason's voice was playful and cruel as he taunted them. Each time he spoke, it came from a new direction.

"My friends are coming for you," he said. "You might want to get out of these webs."

His laughter rang through the trees.

"Rick?" Jonah asked.

"He's not wrong about the webs," Rick said. "Slow and careful. Claire in the middle and I'll bring up the rear."

"I'm going to kill the evil weasel," Claire said.

"Hannah's fine," Rick said. "She's already awake, back in the control room."

"I hope she stabs him while he's still in here," Claire said.

Jonah yelled out, standing awkwardly in place. He had stumbled into a near-invisible web. At the same time, a thick stand of webbing launched out of the shadows to drag Rick stumbling back.

They were an experienced team who had handled trap weavers in real life, so they moved quickly into action. Claire's wand, glowing at the tip, cut Jonah free of the web as she used it like a knife. Rick planted his feet, and even with the mushy ground underfoot, his immense strength arrested the force dragging on him. He gripped the web and yanked hard, yanking a huge spider off a tree to sail through the air towards him. Swinging his huge sword in one hand, he cut the monster in half as it tumbled through the air, then scraped the sticky web off his hand with the blade.

Jonah slogged back through the mud, putting up his huge shield as the three of them backed away. Multiple strands of web shot at it, but slid off, as if it were greased in oil. Spiders were crawling all over the trees around them now, leaping from one to the other.

"How are there so many?" Claire asked, firing off bolts from her wand. With each bolt, a spider fell but the tree-hopping creatures were outpacing their careful withdrawal. Surrounding them, the spiders were able to fire webbing from the sides where Jonah couldn't cover, but it accomplished little. Claire ignored the webs, her barrier offering even less purchase than Jonah's shield. Rick danced around as if he wasn't shin-deep in mud, his huge sword flashing out, quick and deadly.

One of Rick's trump cards was an essence ability that temporarily ramped up his speed and power, and he put it to good use. His huge sword was incredibly heavy, but he waved it like a baton, intercepting webs and slashing through spiders. The blade of his sword was glowing red hot and had burst into flame, cutting through webs and spiders alike with a searing hiss. He had been saving his abilities for a crucial moment, but there was an army of spiders bearing down on them.

“This way!” Jonah shouted, wading into thigh-deep water. “They don’t swim.”

It was a wide patch of water, common enough in the marsh, but it had one advantage: no trees were rising out of it. Following Jonah let them escape the trap weaver onslaught. The lack of trees gave the monsters no place to jump to, and the absence of canopy meant no shadows for Jason to jump out of. Reaching the middle of the water, it had never gone deeper than Claire’s waist.

“Now we wait,” Rick said. “Without us, Jason becomes the only food on the market. He can’t avoid them all, riled up like they are.”

The three waited, back to back as they watched the tree-line for movement. The glowing orb was floating over them, light shining off the water. The screeching sounds of trap weavers came from all around. The water stilled around them as they stopped moving. Eventually, the trap weavers started calming, their shrieks diminishing down until they finally stopped.

“Do you think they got him?” Claire asked.

“They had to, right?” Jonah said.

“We have to go check,” Rick said. “I think the loudest concentration of screeching came from over... did anyone else feel that?”

“I can feel it crawling on my boots,” Jonah said. “There’s something in the water.”

“Out of the water,” Rick commanded, pointing in a direction. Even as he did, the water around them started roiling like a boiling soup. The barrier around Claire started flashing in staccato rhythm.

Jonah grimaced and Jonah let out a painful grunt.

“What is that?” Claire asked, pushing down panic. “It keeps attacking my shield. It’s going to eat through all my mana.”

“Just keep moving!” Rick yelled. Their resolve showing as they kept didn’t slow their pace, even as something attacked them under the water.

Claire’s shield absorbed attacks at the cost of mana, regardless of the strength of the attack. Rapid, weak attacks were the shield’s weakness, and something was attacking it in swarms under the water. Unhappily, she let the shield drop before her mana was emptied out, immediately feeling the sting as something started biting into her legs.

Their attackers were revealed to be leeches as the creatures climbed high enough up their bodies to rise above the water. The leeches crawled over them in search of vulnerable flesh.

Claire fought through the pain to chant spell after spell, cleansing afflictions and healing through bleeds. The others had dropped their weapons to have their hands free, Jonah yanking the shield off his arm. They tugged off leeches with both hands and tossed them away, the leeches taking gobbets of flesh with them. The adventurers' efforts made little headway with the swarming leeches.

"My spells can't keep up!" Claire yelled. The leeches constantly inflicted bleeds and afflictions, faster than she could chant. The afflictions slowly but surely stacked up while the bleeds soaked up the healing. Their skin started to blacken around the leech bites. All the while, they kept making for the shoreline, finally struggling out of the water.

Suddenly Jason was there, a lunging kick sending Claire splashing back into the water. Jonah threw a gauntleted fist, but Jason danced lightly away on the surface of the water. Claire sat up, spluttering, only for Jason to kick her in the teeth in passing, sending her back down. He pointed at Rick.

"Your fate is to suffer."

Rick had his hand extended out in the direction of the water. His huge sword was spinning through the air, throwing off droplets of water as it flew past Jason and into Rick's hand. Jonah held his own hand out and an iron spear appeared in it.

Both men threw their weapons. They struck home with accuracy but kept going, Jason's cloak suddenly empty. After being dragged through the air, the cloak disappeared and Jonah could see his spear splash uselessly into the water. Rick's sword stopped in the air and flew back to his hand.

"What was that?" Jonah asked, looking around for Jason as he yanked off leeches. "I thought he could only teleport through shadows?"

"I don't know," Rick said, likewise yanking off leeches.

"My cloak is a shadow," Jason said, walking out of the trees well out of melee range. His cloak was no longer around him and they could see his face. His eyes were wide and his mouth was twisted in a deranged smirk. He

looked hungry for something that definitely shouldn't be food. The cloak formed around him once more, hiding his face and its disturbing grin.

"Finally ready for a fair fight?" Jonah asked, another spear appearing in his hand.

"Two against one is hardly fair," Jason said.

"You mean three," Jonah said. Rick was quicker on the uptake, looking to the water behind them. Claire's body floated on the surface with the awkward stillness of death, leeches swarming over it.

"She focused her healing on us," Rick said bitterly as they looked at her corpse, robbed of dignity in death. He turned to spit invective at Jason, but had vanished again while they were transfixed by the fate of their healer.

"I'M GOING TO RIP YOUR HEAD OFF!" Jonah screamed into the air.

"Are you sure?" Jason's voice came from the trees, lilting and off-kilter.

"Your healer is gone," his voice came from another direction.

"All I have to do now is wait," he said, from a new direction again.

Rick grimaced, knowing Jason was right. They had managed to tear off most of the leeches, which couldn't move through the mud like they could in the water, but the damage was done. Standing around with no recourse, he could do nothing, even as he collapsed to the ground. That left only Jonah.

Jonah had the greatest fortitude of the team. His resilience and heightened resistances let him last well beyond his comrades, but he could do no more than Rick. He screamed rage into the shadowy woods, then spotted Jason emerge, once again at a distance. He threw his spear, expecting Jason to vanish into darkness again. Instead, Jason made no move to avoid it and the spear impaled him, low and to the side of his torso. He staggered back several steps before righting himself, not having made a sound.

Jason regained his balance, then pulled the spear from his body, hand over hand as Jonah watched. Holding the spear in one hand, Jason pushed the hood of his cloak back with the other, revealing his face. He took the spear and slowly ran his tongue along the shaft as Jonah watched in shock. Jason tossed the spear aside, eyes wide as lips, tainted with his own blood, took on a maniacal grin.

"I taste good," Jason said, looking absently at the blood on his hands. Then he looked up at Jonah.

"I wonder how yours will taste."

"You aren't touching my blood, you crazy freak!"

"Are you sure?" Jason asked, then chanted out a spell.

"Your blood is not yours to keep, but mine on which to feast."

Red life force started shining out of Jonah's body, streaks of dark colours reflecting the afflictions he was suffering. Red light streamed away, through the air toward Jason. Jason threw his arms back, pushing his head forward with a wild and hungry grin. The life force vanished into his face as he moaned with pleasure.

"You're seriously messed up!" Jonah said as his remaining life force returned to his body. He could barely stand now, blackened veins visible under his skin.

"You're not looking so good, Jonah," Jason said. "Don't worry; I can clear that right up."

"Feed me your sins."

"The red light appeared again from within Jonah, but this time the tainted colours poured out into Jason, leaving the dim light of Jonah's life force clean.

"Refreshing," Jason said, as if Jonah's affliction were a cup of iced tea.

The curse and poison were cleansed, but the bleeding continued and Jonah was too far gone to rally.

"You said you would show me what it means to fight a Geller," Jason said, walking slowly forward. "But I've fought Gellers, Jonah, and I'm not sure you live up to the name."

Jason stepped onto the water, walking past Jonah to Claire's body. Jonah could barely keep his to his as he turned to face Jason, almost stumbling into the mud. He watched Jason, standing over Claire's body, grip the elf's long, blonde hair, stained dark by muddy water and her own blood. He pulled her up out of the water.

"Look at your friends, Jonah. You were meant to protect them, but they died helpless and agonising deaths. Like you will. I've seen what it means to fight a Geller, Jonah. This is what it is to fight me."

He let Claire drop back into the water.

"Just end this, you sick lunatic," Jonah said, glaring defiance.

Jason walked casually up to Jonah, who could barely stand, let alone fight back. Jason walked around him, looking him over like a slab of meat in a butcher shop. Jonah lacked the strength to turn and face him again. Jason shoved him in the back and Jonah toppled into the mud. Jason stepped forward, pushing down Jonah's head with his foot.

"I've never seen anyone drown in mud before," Jason said.

In the viewing room, the window went dark as Jonah's feeble struggling came to a stop. In the aftermath, there was silence.