

Chapter 107: All the Good People We Can Get

The expedition was going Island by Island, searching for traces of what was disrupting the astral space. They made their first discovery on the third island; a five-sided column, about as tall as a person and covered in magical engravings. One of the adventurers, who was also a member of the Magic Society, was examining it while Danielle Geller hovered nearby.

“Well?” Danielle asked.

“Definitely some kind of astral magic,” the man said. “We could have used Landemere Vane, if someone hadn’t gone and killed him. He was a dab hand at this kind of thing. Even Clive Standish would have been a good pick. He’s only iron rank, but he knows his astral magic.”

“I didn’t pick the expedition members,” Danielle said. “Complaining about what we don’t have isn’t productive, in any case. What can you tell me?”

“Not much,” the man said. “It’s a relay for a larger effect. Some kind of astral magic on a very large scale but I’d need to find a central node to get more. Even then, this isn’t like anything I’ve seen. We need an astral magic specialist.”

Danielle scowled. The makeup of the expedition was an absolute mess. Every prominent family in Greenstone wanted to go along and Elspeth Arella had accepted them all. It was too many people with too little ability, to the point Danielle had wanted to pull out her family’s participation entirely. She couldn’t convince enough of the family leadership for that, so she ended up agreeing. When things went inevitably wrong, she could at least mitigate the damage if she was present. She did lodge a formal protest over Elspeth Arella’s head, however, directly with the Adventure Society’s Continental Council.

“Large scale,” she said unhappily. “Large enough to disrupt a massive, desert-spanning astral space?”

“I would say exactly large enough. If we can find some more of these, I might be able to pinpoint a central node. That might lead us to whoever set all this up.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” Danielle said, patting the man on the shoulder. “Good work.”

Jason and Vincent rushed through the Adventure Society campus toward the prison tower. With them were Jory and Belinda, who had hurried from Jory’s clinic after Jason sent an anxious message through his voice chat power. The four of them were walking swiftly, not breaking into a run only to avoid attention.

“I’m an idiot,” Jason said as they marched. “I was so impressed with myself. Pure hubris. I stupidly forgot that the most fundamental aspect of corruption is working around the rules, not within them.”

“I don’t know why the director is doing this,” Vincent said.

“She has a number of compelling reasons. Leverage on the Duke, to start with. If one of his judges makes a shady ruling regarding the service agreement between the city and the Society, the director gets another arrow in her quiver. Then there’s Lucian Lamprey. I bet he was willing to cough up some reforms he couldn’t care less about in return for the director going along with it.”

“But getting rid of corruption is her whole agenda,” Vincent said. “I don’t understand her turning around and using it herself.”

“I warned you this had the stink of politics,” Jason said. “She doesn’t actually care about eliminating corruption. Cleaning up this branch is just her ticket into the upper ranks of the Adventure Society.”

“You were right,” Vincent said. “We just ended up pieces in someone else’s game. You only got involved because I asked you.”

“You were coming from a decent place, unlike Elspeth Arella. We need to look forward; there’s no point fretting over what’s done.”

“I’m still unclear on what’s happening,” Belinda said. “Jory just said we had to go and brought me here.”

“You didn’t explain it to me, either,” Jory said.

They spotted the tower. It would have been faster to cut straight across the grass, but Jason steered them onto the more meandering walkway.

“Stick to the paths,” Jason said. “We don’t want to draw Arella’s attention.”

“She can tell if people are walking on the grass?” Belinda asked.

“No, but rushing across the grass to the prison tower is something people might pay attention to. The longer before Arella finds out what we’re up to, the better.”

“What are we up to?” Jory asked. “You said we had to hurry a lot, but never actually said.”

“Sophie’s sentence-dispensation hearing is today,” Vincent said. “She’s already been sentenced to indenture, and today is when that indenture gets assigned.”

“I thought it was being assigned to you,” Belinda said to Jason.

“The rules are very clear on that,” Jason said. “Unfortunately, rules only matter so long as they matter to the powerful.”

“I could have told you that,” Belinda said.

“Lucian Lamprey has a legal advocate who will move that because the contract was an open one, the clause in the service agreement with the city doesn’t apply,” Vincent explained.

“Is that how it works?” Jory asked.

“Not even a little,” Jason said. “The argument is worthless.”

“Then what’s the issue?” Jory asked.

“That’s where I come in,” Vincent said. “The Adventure Society director is powerful, but she rose up very quickly and doesn’t know all the old networks. The Adventure Society’s legal advocate she ordered not to contest Lamprey’s court argument gave me a heads-up. The magistrate had also been handled, but that’s nothing new. I just don’t understand why Arella is working with Lamprey when she’s been trying to get rid of him.”

“Ousting Lamprey was always a means to an end,” Jason said. “If she can get him to fall into line, that serves her just as well. The sham court ruling is just gravy.”

“Is the court ruling that bad for the Duke?” Jory asked. “Can’t he just point out that the Adventure Society didn’t fight it?”

“There’s a hundred ways around that,” Vincent said. “Arella could claim the Adventure Society didn’t see the point of challenging over a minor case. She could throw the advocate under the wagon, claim incompetence or corruption.”

“She could have him killed off and claim no one knows what his motivations were,” Jason added.

“She wouldn’t go that far, would she?” Vincent asked.

“Her father is one of the Big Three,” Jason said. “She’d have her dad do it.”

“Dorgan?” Belinda said. “He’s the father of the Adventure Society’s director?”

“She’s been keeping it under her hat, for obvious reasons,” Jason said.

“Should you even be telling us this?” Jory asked.

“She lost discretion privileges when she lied to my face,” Jason said. “She told me she would help, then stabbed me in the back as I was congratulating myself over being such a political genius.”

They reached the prison tower, Jory and Belinda waiting outside while Jason and Vincent went in.

“Mr Asano,” Albert said. “Come to check on your prisoner?”

“I’ve come to check her out of prison, Bert,” Jason said.

“Since it was an open contract,” Albert said, “there’s a little extra paperwork. I can release her into the custody of the contracted agent, but with an open contract, you only count as the contracted agent if you’re the one that closed it. I’ll need the documentation that confirms your status.”

Vincent took a folder from his leather satchel, taking out a short stack of documents. He put them down in front of the security screen, pushing them under the narrow slot at the base.

“Copy of contract,” Albert checked off, leafing through the documents. “Confirmation of contract closure, registration of contract closure. Please hold your badge up against the security screen, Mr Asano.”

“No worries,” Jason said, taking his badge out and pushing it against the glass window between himself and Albert. Albert pressed one of the documents against the other side of the glass and it pulsed briefly with a yellow light.

“All in order,” Albert continued and turned back to the papers Vincent had given him. “Finally, order of release into custody of contracted agent. Which is now officially you, Mr Asano.”

Albert stamped the various forms.

“I can hand her over to you, then, sir.”

“Quickly would be ideal,” Bert,” Jason said.

“I will have to fit her with a tracking bracelet,” Albert said. “Wouldn’t want people just running off. Especially a pretty girl like that, sir. You could see how she might turn a man’s head. Get him to let her loose against his better judgement.”

“Perish the thought,” Jason said. “Fast as you can would be really appreciated.”

It was only a few minutes later that Albert, accompanied by an iron-rank guard, brought out Sophie. Around her wrist was a simple metal hoop.

Jason took out a bottle of the Norwich Distillery’s finest, handing it over to Albert.

“By way of apology,” Jason said.

“What for?” Albert asked.

“For what’s going to happen later.”

“Well?” Danielle asked as Thalia entered the command tent.

“Still nothing,” Thalia said. “That’s two hours overdue.”

“Then our scouting team is likely either captured or dead, and we still have no idea who by. How is camp readiness?”

“Still on alert but this is a large and undisciplined group. Too many people used to being captain and not enough willing to be crew. They’ve been on full alert since the team was due back and trying to keep them focused for hours at a time is making them inattentive and rebellious.”

“Damn Arella for handing me all this dross,” Danielle said. “All our good people are wasted keeping an eye on the bad ones. With half the number we’d be twice as effective.”

“You’re too used to only dealing with Gellers,” Thalia said. “You know better than to complain about what you want instead of dealing with what you have.”

Danielle flashed her a tired smile.

“You’re right. Thank you.”

“So what do we do? We have a missing scout team and fractious troops.”

“We give them focus,” Danielle said. “Get ready to mobilise in full force; we’re going to find out what happened to our people.”

“Heading into unknown territory, potentially against an unknown enemy?”

“Better than waiting for them to come to us. At least it gives us the initiative.”

Suddenly there was an explosion in the camp, followed by yells and screams.

Danielle and Thalia went outside to see some kind of automaton army storming the camp. The enemies were not flesh and blood but built of from wood, steel and stone. The majority were the size and shape as people, but there were towering golems standing two or three times the height of a person, and even stranger constructions. There was a huge, steel spider on, which a figure with robes could be seen. Other robed figures rode similarly outlandish creations, but there were only around a dozen robed figures in total, all at the rear of the enemy forces.

The pair were nonplussed for only a moment before they started loudly barking orders.

“The girl’s tracking bracelet?” Arella asked.

“Not showing up,” the deputy director, Genevieve, said. “The last location shown was in front of the cloud palace.”

“He’s hiding her with Emir Bahadir,” Arella mused. “No surprise the tracker won’t work in there. How strong is that tie?”

“Asano with Bahadir? Superficial, from what I’ve been able to gather. The connection is Rufus Remore.”

“Can Bahadir be convinced to hand her over?”

“Unlikely. My read is that Bahadir will keep showing Asano courtesy at least until Remore gets back and he can make another assessment. It might be different if we had something to offer but that’s unlikely. For a gold-ranker in this city, wanting and having are the same thing.”

Arella tilted her head, her aura senses picking something up.

“Trenslow is in the elevator. He may storm out, so go out the side door and be waiting for him when he leaves.”

Genevieve nodded, taking the second door into the conference room instead of straight back out to the hall.

Vincent arrived outside the director's office, taking a steeling breath.

"About time, Trenslo," Arella's voice rang displeasure through the door. "Get in here."

"Madam Director," Vincent said as he entered. She was seated behind her desk.

"Where were you, Trenslo?" she demanded. "Did you stop to wax your moustache?"

He had, in fact, done exactly that. The long, familiar process calmed him, and he felt better equipped to face the world with it in best condition.

Arella didn't wait for an answer, waving a piece of paper at him.

"Would you care to explain why I'm holding in my hand an order placing a prisoner into the personal custody of Jason Asano, issued by you?"

"You will find that all rules and procedures were followed, Madam Director."

Vincent was putting on a better show of steadfastness than he thought he would manage, but had no illusions the director didn't see through it. Arella took a breath and sat back in her chair.

"I had thought you were my man, Vincent," she said softly. "I thought you agreed with what I was doing."

"I did," Vincent said. "But then you started cutting corners; hurting the people who wanted to help you. I couldn't understand why, but I was willing to be patient. Now you've shown yourself to be everything you claimed to be fighting against. Selling a woman to someone like Lucian Lamprey? Don't even try and tell me you don't know what fate awaits her in his hands. With a father like yours, there's no pleading ignorance."

"Asano told you," Arella said. "I wondered if he would."

"He said it won't really hurt you. The things you've done will outshine where you came from. He even thought that you chose eradicating corruption as your project for advancement because it plays to the story of rising above your criminal origins."

"He's not unintelligent, although far from as smart as he thinks. Where is he now, Vincent?"

"I don't know. He said he wasn't going anywhere."

"Of course he did; he's arrogant and reckless. Running around, believing himself some master manipulator. If it weren't for people not wanting to anger Rufus Remore and Danielle Geller, he would have been put in the ground months ago. He stood, right where you are, and told me how things were going to go. It never even entered his head that he

was being played. You know I'm going to take his membership if he doesn't produce the girl. I hope you told him that."

"I guess Lamprey won't keep his end of the deal unless he gets her," Vincent accused.

"I'm not looking for your perspective on my affairs, Vincent. You no longer work here. Genevieve is waiting outside to take your official's pin and other accoutrements."

Vincent knew it was coming before he set foot in the building, but it didn't lessen the sting. Without bothering to respond, he turned and walked over to the door.

"I didn't tell you to leave," she told him. He opened the door and paused, without looking back.

"You just gave up the right to tell me a damn thing," he said. "I thought you were different. That you had integrity. Just so you know, I don't care who your father is. You're worth hating all on your own."

He closed the door behind him to find the deputy director waiting in the hall as promised. Vincent had always liked the elderly elf. She was stern but fair in her dealings, at least the one's he was privy to. It saddened him to know she was aware of the director's activities.

He was taking off his Adventure Society pin and handing it over when a flustered functionary came stumbling out of the elevator and rushed down the hall.

"Deputy director!" the winded woman greeted. "Something's happening with the expedition!"

"Tell me."

"The tracking stones connected to their badges. They're marking people as dying. A lot of iron-rankers, but also bronze and even a silver."

Genevieve frowned as she considered briefly, then threw open the door to the director's office.

"Inside," Genevieve commanded and the functionary scuttled in. She looked at Vincent and pressed the pin back into his hand.

"Why?" he asked.

"It sounds like we'll need all the good people we can get."