Chapter 129

With both of my tetsubos shattered, I picked up one of the orog blades.  It was three feet in length and as wide as my hand.  The thickness of the blade was about a finger width, and I estimated its heft at a good sixty pounds.  The three-hundred-pound orog would have done serious damage if they had been able to land a strike on me in combat.

With the heavy sword in one hand and my aether pistol in the other, I went first through the doorway.  I could smell hints of ocean water in the air.  It was too faint to be sure, but we were close. This tunnel definitely went to the sea.  The tunnel was new construction as well. Partially rock and partly reinforced concrete.

Artemis spoke from behind, “I do not sense anyone close, but I did not sense the Orog either. I think this plan had gone to shit before it even started. This passage is nearly a mile long on Rincewind’s map. If we are ambushed from both ends, we may not last.”

The lich Tamaris laughed, “Ever the optimist, Artemis. I still have a portal stone,” he tossed the other mage a large runic rock from his robes. “That will take you just outside of Paris near Rincewind’s estate. Use it if you need to.”

“I still have the one from when I was his apprentice,” he tossed the stone back. “The problem with the portal stones is they are easy to disrupt. This aboleth knows we are coming.”

None of the conversations behind me helped my mood. The tunnel opened into another circular chamber that had a stench to it. Twenty stone alcoves had an array of blankets. There was a stack of one-gallon Chef Boyardee Ravalloi cans in the center of the room. Dozens of empty cans littered the floor.

Tamaris picked up one of the unopened cans and inspected it. “Well, at least we know what they were eating. Looks like nineteen of the alcoves were occupied. We killed ten, so maybe there are only nine left.” He explained his logic.

“So, where are the other nine?” I asked, and Tamaris shrugged, unconcerned.

“We barely walked a quarter mile in the tunnel. There may be more of these barracks-style rooms. I do not think we should assume there are just nine orog left,” Artemis advised. His head snapped to the tunnel. “Something is coming, and it is moving fast.”

I listened, and I could hear the echo that sounded like a horse galloping on the pavement. A pressure on my mind built for a moment before it disappeared. “Is it the aboleth?” I asked.

“No,” Artemis focused. “It is an otyugh. A bloody large one at that.” He prepped us, “The mind attacks won’t work on us. It has two tentacles that can grapple you.” That was all the prep as I started firing my aether pistol at the mass down the corridor. Tamaris joined me, sending fire lances as well. The creature was the size of a rhino as it charged at us.

I noticed Artemis had gone invisible. The thundering beast had long dagger-like teeth lining its maw. The hideousness of the creature made me reconsider being a front-line fighter. As it got closer, I holstered my pistol and took a two-handed grip on the blade.

As it barreled towards me, I dodged and slashed its side, scoring a long strike. One of the appendages lashed out, grabbed me, and slammed me into the floor. I was disoriented as it dragged me along the floor. I lashed out, trying to break its hold on me.

I heard Artemis yell, “Get free so I can lock it in a force cube!”

That was easier said than done. It lifted me and slammed me again. My tough incubus body was handling the punishment, but it still hurt. I noticed there were now four different Tamaris’ standing around casting firelances at it. I must have received a concussion. The other appendage arm wiped through one of Tamaris’ images and disappeared. I forgot he was an illusion mage. I was slammed again into the ground and was happy not to be brought into its mouth.

The orog blade finally found purchase on the rubbery arm, and I forced it through and twisted to open the wound. The monster bellowed and released me. I stumbled away, realizing my knee was dislocated. The creature didn’t pursue as it was now contained in an invisible cube.

Artemis winced as he appeared, “Barbeque it already, Tamaris! This is draining my aether quickly.”

Tamaris focused, and the cube contained the flames as the creature was burned alive. I bent down and forced my knee joint into alignment. I could feel my incubus rapid healing working but limped a little when standing. Artemis dropped to his knees when the creature’s howls of pain ended.

He was sweating profusely and moaned, “I am almost out of aether.”

Tamaris shook his head at the wizard, seemingly disappointed. He looked at me, “How is your knee?”

“I should be fine in a few minutes. How long do you need to recover, Artemis?” I walked off my limp as I spoke.

Artemis looked concerned, “My aether pool will not replenish fast enough on this layer. I already used my aether focus in my staff to contain the otyugh. I can make one more force wall, and that is it. Maybe I can hold the wall for sixty seconds. No more containment cubes, though.”

Tamaris considered our state. “That creature was under the control of the aboleth. I am sure of that. We need to continue. Rincewind and the others are expecting us.”

Artemis sounded doubtful, “What if whatever killed Vynth is slowing Rincewind down?”

“Who is Vynth?” I asked.

Artemis answered, “A strong earth mage. Not strong enough to party with us but strong enough to collapse the tunnels. At least, Rincewind hoped he could.”

Artemis was obviously getting cold feet, “We still have almost a mile before we reach the main chamber. We should wait here and see what develops.”

“No. Apollyon, are you with me?” the lich asked, ignoring Artemis’ protests.

I was having grave doubts myself. This would have been easy with six people, but now we only had three, and one was almost useless. “Let us proceed with caution.”

I led the way, and the passage continued with no end in sight. Artemis lagged behind us, and I could sense he was experiencing some fear. A large opening to our left had us pause. The horrid stench from inside told us what it was. Tamaris went inside and confirmed, “It was the otyugh’s nest. Two bodies of orog and lots of fish from the ocean. I think the aboleth was keeping it like a pet. I am going to burn it in case there are any eggs in the refuse piles. You two should move down the corridor further. The smoke is going to be unpleasant to breathe.”

I could see Artemis’ worry rise. The smoke would make the passage behind us impassible and only allow us to travel toward the aboleth lair. He asked, “Can you burn it after we deal with the aboleth?” But Tamaris was already shooting jets of fire from his hands. I pulled Artemis down the corridor.

Even with the slope downward, the thick black smoke followed us. Tamaris caught us with us, and his clothes smelled like burnt fish. I asked, “So was the aboleth feeding his orog to the creature? You saw two bodies. Do you think they are all finished?”

“I think there are more orog, but they are probably above ground disguised as the maid was. The otyugh was the gatekeeper, I think. The last line of defense for the aboleth,” Tamaris processed his thoughts.

We only walked about another dozen steps when the tunnel shook. We all looked at each other. Artemis closed his eyes and opened them a moment later. “The pressure wave is consistent with what I expected. I believe Rincewind has collapsed the tunnel. I can not see far enough to know on which side of the collapsed tunnel they were.” As if in response to his statement, a powerful gust of ocean air buffeted us as it raced up the passage.

Tamaris said, “We need to hurry then. They may already be fighting the abomination.”

He still waited for me to lead the charge. I was happy that Artemis was still tagging alone. Maybe now that there was a chance to reconnect with the other group, he was getting some confidence back. I broke into a light jog but had my senses on high alert. I felt the air getting colder and knew we were close. I heard the sounds of fighting and explosions. The tunnel ended, and we entered a large chamber.

It was massive, and a pool was in the center, surrounded by a rocky ledge. Rincewind was on the far shore, and Achellion was hovering in the air with his wings out, looking into the water. Two dead creatures were on the shore—they were orogs. I did not see Lezerath anywhere, but I did not have time to think about it as my mind was suddenly assaulted. I stumbled and felt the conflict in my mind as the aboleth tried to invade my mind space.

I had to trust my mind constructs could handle the assault, and I needed to help Rincewind. From behind me, Tamaris yelled, “I will boil the water! Do not fall in! I need ten minutes, and it will drive it to the surface.”

I scanned the waters looking for a sign and then removed my top and shirt and transformed. Achellion was smart to get in the air. It would be much easier to see from above. I could see a large shape deep in the waters and pointed it to Achellion. He flew next to me as we watched it swim about fifty feet down. He had trouble seeing it as my abyssal sight was so strong. I got a thought and pulled out my vial of marble light stones. I had bought 120 of them and didn’t really need them but had stored them in my mind space.

I activated all of them and started tossing them into the water, spreading them out. The assault on my mind suddenly got stronger, and I could feel the rage from the aboleth at the light stones sinking into the water. I trusted my constructs and kept dropping the stones. It looked like a massive shadowy eel swimming agitatedly under the surface.

Rincewind yelled from the other side, “We collapsed both exits! It cannot escape. Be careful, it will attack when it knows it has to emerge!”

I hovered with Achellion and waited. Then I sensed a change in Achellion, and he suddenly swung his massive sword at me. Dodging, I yelled, “We have a problem!”

I was suddenly in aerial combat with a dragonkin. I thought this completely unfair as I had never practiced aerial combat, and he was well-practiced. My advantage was I had better maneuverability and slightly better speed. He chased me, and I evaded as best I could. He sliced the membrane of my wing, but it did not hamper me. He was trying to corner me on the ceiling.

I started to talk to him, “Achellion, how could you let the monster take over your mind? Don’t you have more pride as a dragon? Fight back!” He did not listen, and the pressure in my own mind was non-existent.

The entire fight was distracting me from tracking the aboleth. I checked and warned Rincewind, “It is moving toward you! Watch out!” He did not seem to hear me as a mass of tentacles lunged out of the water.

The tentacles sparked against a shield around Rincewind, who already looked tired. I guessed from collapsing the tunnels. He had not planned to do that task himself. My distraction in watching Rincewind defend himself got me a blade into my side.

The massive sword cut into my side between my ribs, and it hurt. I had completely fucked myself. I only saw one out for me. I needed to get Archellion back in control of his own body. I dropped into my mind space to find Casper bleeding and panting in the pedestal room. I studied my mind space, and the bridge connecting me to the aboleth attack was in the park. When someone tried to take a mind space, they created a bridge between minds. I raced there to see a massive hole in the outer wall and a familiar battleground.

I found I couldn’t enter the plane myself. Nashima was in her couatl form, flying and handling two creatures that looked like otyughs but much larger. Calypso was huge and stopped the attack of a half dozen lizard men while Lilith and Pandora fired aether pistols from a distance. I guessed Casper had been slain and was reconstituted in the pedestal room.

“We need to create a mind link with Achellion. He lost his fight and is probably going to kill me on the outside,” I yelled out into the space.

Lilith responded, “Nashima, can we do that?”

Nasima roared as she spattered one of the monsters with her tail swipe, “How close is he?”

“Well, he has his sword stuck inside my body, so pretty close,” I yelled.

Nashima retreated to the park and next to me, switching to her humanoid form. “Give me permission to establish a bridge.” I just thought about the release of permissions, and in the mind space, another portal opened. Nashima split into two beings, one returning to the battle and the other one diving into the new mind bridge that went to Achellion.

She yelled a battle cry and spoke, “Retreat and split yourselves between the mind bridges. We need to fight on two fronts!” Casper came bounding into the park, completely healthy, and split into two as each alpha wolf launched into a different mind bridge. Lilith was next to switch, and then Pandora.

Pandora quipped, “Are you sure you can handle two of me?” Before she headed out to battle on the two fronts. Calypso was last, and I could feel the strain on my mind as it waged two equally important battles.

I returned to my body and found Achellion’s clawed hand squeezing at my throat. His sword was still lodged in my ribs. I couldn’t stab him as I needed his help in killing the aboleth. I dropped my sword and used both hands to pry his hand from my throat. I found I was much stronger than him and easily moved them away. His claws were covered in my blood.

The heat of the pool below was rising, and aboleth, who was still attacking Rincewind’s shield, was feeling it. I used my martial skills to punch and job the dragonkin. More to distract him than hurt him. He finally started to have his glassy eyes clear and gained control over his body.

He frantically looked around, taking in the scene. “I am going to need this back,” he grasped his sword and pulled it free. Removing the sword was a relief but painful, and I think he took one of my rub bones with him. I focused on keeping the wound closed until the blood flow stopped.

Achellion was diving on the aboleth from above to take vengeance for being controlled. The aboleth didn’t see him coming as Rincewind cast a bright, sparkly spell. The large sword went deep into one of its eyes. He then produced two short swords and plunged them into each of the other eyes. The howl of anger and pain erupted from the creature, and tentacles flashed about wildly. Achellion was flung aside but recovered quickly.

At this time, Tamaris had moved close enough to launch a continuous flame spell on the creature. It howled later and tried to retreat into the boiling water, but Artemis had erected his force wall, preventing its retreat. Achellion waded back in with new blades and hacked bravely at the burning monster. The session kept going for minutes, and then it was silent. Tamaris burned it further until it was nothing but ash. I landed next to Rincewind and sat down.

My wound still had not closed, but the bleeding had stopped. I asked, “Where is Lezerath? Is it over?”

Rincewind fell softly to sit next to me, “She was on the other side of the cave-in. His minions shattered Achellion’s opal necklace. We were lucky we won today.”

“What about Vynth? What happened to him?” I asked of the earth mage.

Rincewind said heavily, “Dead. I should have never asked him to help. The aboleth knew we were coming.”

I lay back on the stone, letting my enhanced healing work. “That just means one of its minions found out about the attack.”

Rincewind lay back with me, “Maybe. But I don’t think so. I think someone in the Magus Arcanum either invited or brought the aboleth here.”

“Care to elaborate?” I asked concerned.

“Not at this time. Your wild theories may have merit, after all, Caleb.” Rincewind replied. Achellion came and stood over us.

“Demon, I owe you. Know that you can collect on that debt at any time.” He looked at Rincewind, “I am returning mage. When can you open me a portal?”

Rincewind closed his eyes, “Let me rest. Maybe in the morning.”

“I agree, in the morning,” and I also closed my eyes.