

## Chapter 100: Legwork

Danielle Geller and Thalia Mercer looked at the water pouring out of the astral space aperture. It was within a crevice in a rocky outcropping but was itself a free-floating circle of shimmering blue. The water streamed out of the aperture, the source of a small creek they were currently standing in. It wasn't the overwhelming torrent that some apertures had, which is why they had chosen this particular one; there wasn't so much force that people couldn't push their way against the water to enter. The other reason being that the first two apertures they tried had already failed and vanished.

"You've been in the astral space before, haven't you?" Danielle asked.

"The last monster surge," Thalia said. Monsters were spawning out of an aperture out in the desert, so we set up a defence point just inside.

"The advantage of having our family seat in the city," Danielle said. "I spent the whole time defending the estate."

Danielle turned back to look at the expedition arrayed out behind her. The order of entry had already been organised, with the silver rankers heading through first to scout and deal with any immediate trouble. She turned back, took a deep breath and pushed herself through the water streaming out.

She emerged underwater, disoriented. She thrashed around, finding a sandy bottom and using it to push herself up. She breached the surface, finding the water was not very deep. She swam away from the aperture in the water, taking a look at her surroundings. She was in a lagoon of turquoise water, under a clear cerulean sky. The lagoon was mostly bounded by rocky rises with scrubby trees growing up the sides, but she spotted a small, sandy beach. Behind it were trees and tropical plants.

Thalia emerged from the aperture and likewise quickly surfaced.

"Nice," Thalia said, swimming away from the aperture to give the next person space. "It'll be good to explore instead of just staying near the aperture and fighting monsters."

\*\*\*

Clive entered the office of the Magic Society director. As normal, the director was absent, while the deputy director, Pochard Finn, was at work behind his own desk. Pochard barely glanced up at the intrusion, continuing to write as he spoke.

"What is it, Standish? I don't have a lot of time with all these people off on the expedition."

"I'm aware, sir," Clive said. "I've been very busy myself, but I've managed to get things reorganised, so I'd like to take some time on another project. As you know, I also have Adventure Society membership."

"Yes, I heard about the marsh hydra," Pochard said. "I can't imagine your contribution was all that much but well done."

"There's an open contract with the Adventure Society," Clive said. "A friend and I want to take a crack at it."

Pochard paused his writing to look up at Clive.

"You want to slack off so you can go to social events in the hope this thief shows up?"

"Actually, sir, we're going to take a different approach. Something that will hopefully have more success."

"Who is this friend of yours?" Pochard asked.

"He's another iron-ranker. Jason Asano."

"The one who handled the lumber mill affair," Pochard mused thoughtfully.

"You know him?"

"I like to keep apprised of goings-on," Pochard said. "You're sure your duties will be covered?"

"I won't be completely absent, sir. I'll be checking in each day to make sure everything is running smoothly."

"Then take what time you need, so long as you still feel your chances of success are reasonable."

"Really?" Clive asked.

Pochard turned back to his work.

"Learn to take yes for an answer, Standish."

\*\*\*

Clive called on Jason in his lodgings. Jason had papers scattered over the refreshment table, picking some up to read from the comfort of a lounge chair.

"How did it go?" Jason asked.

"Surprisingly well," Clive said, still registering the surprise. He nodded at all the papers.

"What's all that?"

"A copy of the contract of service between the Adventure Society and the City of Greenstone. If the Duke of Greenstone and the Adventure Society director are playing some kind of game with this thief as the central piece, I thought I should get a look at the board."

“And?” Clive asked, sitting down.

“It’s possible this whole thing is about trying to get the Duke to violate the terms of the agreement. It gives local authorities a lot of influence in Adventure Society affairs. It would make sense, given that Elspeth Arella’s driving goal is to eliminate that influence. I’m inclined to think that isn’t it, though.”

“Why not?”

“The agreement is up for renegotiation in a couple of years, and the director doesn’t strike me as an impatient person. If she were to violate the terms herself, trying to provoke the Duke, he could appeal to the core branches of the Adventure Society, maybe even get Arella replaced. Given her proclivities are a direct threat to aristocratic power, having almost anyone else in her seat when the negotiations come up is a win for him. I don’t think she’s willing to take that risk when all she has to do is wait for her chance to renegotiate terms.”

“Then what is it all about?” Clive asked.

“I’m not sure,” Jason set. “There’s some third factor beyond the Duke and Arella’s basic agendas. Arella wants something, and she’s willing to push the boundaries to get it.”

“How does that affect us?” Clive said. “We’re just trying to catch the thief.”

“It’s the knife you don’t see that stabs you, Clive.”

“What next, then?”

“We turn off the filter, pinch one off in the pool and see who comes to clean it up.”

“What?” Clive asked.

“We catch the thief, and see who tries to stop us.”

“What if they do stop us?”

“Have some self-confidence, man.”

Jason started gathering the scattered pages.

“There were a few interesting things in the agreement,” Jason said as he put them away in a leather folder. “The Adventure Society has quite a lot of say in civic affairs when it involves a Society contract. Interestingly, it puts that power with the individual adventurers executing the contracts, rather than the Society itself.”

“What does that matter?” Clive asked.

“The loosened adventurer standards, have allowed more-or-less the entire aristocracy to be nominal members of the Adventure Society, so decentralising power is another means for the aristocracy to circumvent the authority of the Adventure Society’s higher officials. I’m starting to understand what Arella is up against, now. It’s something worth knowing; another trick to have up the sleeve.”

“What now, then?” Clive asked. “I know we won’t be randomly attending social events, hoping they get robbed. People have been trying that for months and it hasn’t worked.”

“Then what do you think should be the first step?” Jason asked.

“Figure out what they’re doing, and how, right?” Clive asked.

“I was thinking the same thing,” Jason said. “We need to go talk to all the victims, learn as much about what was taken and the thief’s methodology as we can.”

“Are these people going to talk to us?” Clive asked.

Jason chuckled.

“These are people used to having the power, not being the victim, and there isn’t anything they can do about it. Don’t underestimate how much that will eat at them. They know that the Adventure Society isn’t letting anyone other than iron-rankers in on this, so a three-star is the best they can hope for. Add in an assist from a Magic Society official and it will seem like a ray of hope. They’ll cooperate.”

“And if they don’t?” Clive asked.

“We’ll talk them into it,” Jason said.

“You say that like it’s going to be easy.”

\*\*\*

Jason and Clive left the townhouse of Lord Vordis and started heading toward the closest loop line transit station. Lord Vordis was a minor noble, but one known for making useful connections between the upper and lower echelons of society.

“Are you sure you should have done that?” Clive asked, glancing back nervously.

“Done what?” Jason asked innocently.

“Told him the Mercers sent you.”

“I didn’t do that,” Jason said.

“I was there!”

“But were you really listening? I never said the Mercers sent me. Yes, the conversation happened to go in such a way that certain connections between myself and the Mercer family came to light. And I suppose I can see how that particular topic of conversation, in proximity to other topics, may have led some people to assume that the Mercers sent me, but I made no such assertion. I’m not responsible for other people’s assumptions, Clive.”

“It really seems like you are.”

“We got what we were after, and that’s the important thing.”

"I can't believe he told you he was smuggling sump coil rods," Clive said. "They're restricted by the Adventure Society and the Magic Society, but he told an adventurer and a Magic Society official."

"Lucky this town's so corrupt," Jason said. "He figured there wouldn't be any major repercussions."

"Because he thought the Mercer family sent you."

"I told you that I'm not responsible for the assumptions of others. What are sump coil rods, anyway?"

"They're used to create very small areas that are invisible to magical senses," Clive said. "Auras, tracking abilities, seeking rituals. Nothing short of gold-rank ritual or ability stands a chance. Very small spaces, though. About the size of a laundry basket."

"What are they used for?"

"The big things about them, is they don't trip warnings. A lot of detection magic, be that abilities, rituals or items, give back a negative reading if they hit a zone they can't penetrate. Use sump coil rods the right way, and most things won't even register the negative space."

"You think maybe they took them to create a hideout they can't be traced to?" Jason asked. "Use a bunch of those rods to stack the spaces?"

"That wouldn't be practical, and they didn't take enough of the rods."

"Well, we just keep collecting puzzle pieces," Jason said. "Eventually we'll have enough to figure out the picture."

\*\*\*

Jason and Clive were in Jason's lodging, poring over notes. Jason's were scattered over the refreshments table in the lounge area, while Clive laid claim to the dining table. More than a week into their investigation, Jason's lodging were so deep in notes, maps, lists and magical tool design documents that Madam Landry refused to have her staff clean around it.

"You just tell me when your done and I'll send people in," she had told Jason. "Just don't leave it too long, or I'll send people in anyway."

In almost three months, the thief had done seventeen jobs. Every day Jason and Clive would go from victim to victim, scene to scene, gathering information.

"They're basically doing two kinds of jobs," Jason mused. "The first type is public, usually some kind of snatch-and-grab of valuables. These jobs are in open places with plenty of escape routes. The loot is frankly, not worth the risk. It tends to be highly specific, which would make fencing it tricky."

“A lot of adventurers have been taking that angle,” Clive said. “The Magic Society has sold a lot of appraisal tools in the last few months.”

“The other type of job tends to be specialised magic equipment. Rare, valuable, sometimes restricted. They’ve taken much bigger risks for these jobs, as well. Every time they’ve come close to being caught it was on this type of job.”

“Whoever this thief is,” Clive said, “they either have an interesting understanding of magical tools or are working with someone who does. Aura masking, material deconstruction, bypassing magical protections. Her methods speak to an eclectic magical knowledge, most likely specialised for this kind of work.”

“A professional thief,” Jason said. “That’s hardly a surprise, at this point.”

“I’d love to meet them,” Clive said. “Their unorthodox approach to magical study would be fascinating to discuss.”

“The whole point of this is so you can do exactly that,” Jason said, sorting through the piles of paper in front of him. He frowned, looking at them all.

“There’s a lot of paper in this city for a place with such a small lumber industry.”

“This is all reed paper,” Clive said. “There’s a local reed that grows prolifically in the delta,” Clive explained absently, not looking up from his own notes. “It’s a fairly easy process to produce paper from it. Pulp it, a little bit of magic and here you go. It’s one of the local exports.”

“Reed paper,” Jason said, running a sheet between his fingers. “I wouldn’t have guessed that. This high-quality stuff.”

Clive started reorganising all the papers in front of him. Some he placed into neat order on the table, others he stacked in haphazard piles on the chairs around it.

“The snatch-and-grabs are obviously some kind of distraction from their true intention,” he reasoned.

“Agreed,” Jason said. “Clearly their true intention is all these magical supplies they’re taking on the other jobs.”

“If I can figure out what all of it is for, then maybe we can figure out their ultimate objective.”

He stood up, rubbing his temples.

“I need a break to clear my head.”

Jason glanced at the clock on the wall. Like everything in Madam Landry’s inn, it was tasteful and understated in design and worked perfectly.

“It’s almost time we headed out, anyway,” Jason said. “There’s something that should be worth seeing.”

“Is it something to do with the mysterious group taking over the expedition to explore that complex we found?” Clive asked. “Word came down from on high to let them take over, which didn’t impress Lucian Lamprey.”

“Who?” Jason asked. “Oh, the director of the Magic Society. Haven’t had the pleasure, yet.”

“Pleasure isn’t the word I’d use,” Clive said. “Still, it was gratifying to see it taken off him the way it was taken off me.”

“Well, you can meet the man who took it off him,” Jason said. “He’s scheduled to arrive this afternoon.”