

Chapter 708

Dark Bargain

Auras erupted in consternation after Musin Heath, the Adventure Society director, announced a potential alliance with the messenger leader. The gold-rankers held their equanimity, but many of the silver-rankers were spiritually up in arms. It was here that the director demonstrated his expertise, spreading his aura out to gently chide the silver-rankers, forcibly imposing calm through deft aura suppression. The director might not be an expert at handling monsters, but the veteran administrator was the Amos Pensinata of controlling an unruly meeting.

“Yes,” the director said. “Obviously, the idea of an alliance with the woman responsible for levelling the city is unpalatable. And make no mistake: she is responsible. We know the plan to attack the city was hers. I am aware of every reason to be angry. Most of you aren’t from this city and you’re furious. I am from this city. This is my home and this woman ground it under her boot. I lost people in the attack. Every friend I have lost people in the attack. If I can muster up the resolve to look at things the way they are and not the way I wish they were, so can all of you.”

He panned his gaze across the room as the people in the meeting settled down. Ebson Jillet, priest of Knowledge, stepped forward.

“The simple fact is,” he stated, “that there is a greater threat to this city than the messengers, although they are the source of this danger as well. We have explained the instability that has affected the natural array. The equilibrium that is the most intrinsic property of such an array is out of balance, and breaking that balance would normally cause the magic of the array to dissipate. Whatever the messengers did to it, that is very much not what happened. Instead of breaking down, the array has been growing in power, at the cost of stability.”

“It took a long time for us to notice the change,” Musin said, picking up the narrative. “The array is feeding on ambient mana that has picked up earth and fire affinities, the purest strains of which come from deep underground. For this reason, it took a long time before we noticed what was happening from the surface. Only once the array started reaching dangerous power levels did we realise and start investigating. The best assessment the Magic Society has is that the power will continue to build to a tipping point where the array can no longer maintain stability. All that power will then be unleashed in catastrophic fashion. Our best estimates place that happening sometime in the next three to five months.”

“How catastrophic?” Emir asked.

“The Magic Society has been using the term supervolcano,” Jillet said. “I looked it up in our historical records, and that term was used for a natural event more than twenty thousand years ago. So, to answer your question based on what I found, I would say extremely catastrophic”

“We should probably stop that, then,” Emir said.

“That was also the conclusion we reached, Mr Bahadir,” Musin said. “Unfortunately, the Magic Society has been coming up short in terms of solutions.”

“We lack the knowledge base,” Clive called out from the back. “The Magic Society—”

“Shut your mouth, silver,” one of the gold-rankers guarding the government contingent growled. “The adults are talking.”

A silver-rank aura settled over the room. The strength of it approached gold-rank and there were unsettling elements that were hard to read, like silhouettes in a fog. Then it withdrew and all eyes were on Jason. He showed no indication of having just let his aura blanket the room like a poison cloud and leaned towards Allayeth. They held a whispered conversation as if they couldn't be heard by everyone in the room.

“I don't like people talking to my friends like that,” he mentioned offhandedly. “I'm trying to be less imperious, though. I don't suppose you could be imperious for me?”

“You'd owe me one,” Allayeth said lightly.

“I can live with that.”

“I wouldn't go making assumptions, Jason,” she teased and he flashed her a grin.

A portal opened and whips lashed out from the other side, wrapping around the limbs, torso and head of the gold-ranker that had scolded Clive. The gold-ranker's aura was crushed and the whips yanked him through the portal which immediately vanished.

“An offensive portal ability,” Jason said appreciatively. “Used inside Emir's cloud palace, no less. Being diamond-rank will be nice.”

“You think you'll be a diamond-ranker?”

“For a while, sure,” he said distractedly. “What were you saying, Clive? Something about a knowledge base?”

The room was silent and still for a long moment, all attention laser-focused on Jason and Allayeth. The diamond-ranker herself was giving Jason an assessing look as he watched Clive attentively.

“Uh...” Clive said, and Jason gave him an encouraging nod. Clive's eyes flickered over the diamond-ranker and he continued.

“As I said,” Clive explained hesitantly, “we lack the knowledge base to do anything with natural arrays. And by ‘we,’ I mean the Magic Society and, by extension, the entire magical research community of Pallimustus. Partly the problem is that natural arrays are rare, but the main issue is internal Magic Society politics. Because of their rarity and lucrative research potential, the people who get the chance to study them have started hoarding the results of their research instead of disseminating it, despite the dissemination of research being the entire point of the Magic Society.”

“Why would they do that?” Humphrey asked.

“Because the next time a natural array comes up,” Clive said, “the people most likely permitted to research it will be those that know the most.”

“Which leads,” Knowledge Priest Jillet said with disapproval, “to a situation where too few people are participating in the research of a field of knowledge. On top of that, those who end up doing the research are the ones who were best at politics, not magical study.”

“Exactly,” Clive glowered, sharing an understanding grimace with the Knowledge Priest.

“The result,” Jillet told the room, “is that, as Mr Standish here said, we lack the knowledge base. The Magic Society attached researchers to the forces contesting the entrance to the underground excavation as soon as we realised what was down there, but they don’t have any response to what’s happening.”

“In fairness,” Musin said, “I don’t know to what degree expertise would help. They never had direct access to study it and were left trying to analyse the distant aura from the surface.”

“The only thing that would accomplish is removing an easy excuse for the incapability,” Clive muttered, with Jillet nodding his agreement.

“In short,” Musin said, “no one from this world understands how to stop the array from annihilating Yaresh and all the towns and villages around it. Which brings us to the messengers. They have magical expertise that we do not.”

“That should not be news to anyone familiar with the new magic that has been spreading over the last few years,” Jillet said. “As to whether that expertise extends to resolving this situation or they are just lying remains an open question. Whatever insidious pact the messengers struck with the Builder cult and what we believed was the Church of Purity, it involved sharing magic not available on this world. A lot of that we’ve managed to capture and add to our own store of magical knowledge. My church has been a large part of that, as has Mr Standish, here.”

He gestured at a nervous Clive.

“If any of you have enjoyed the improved astral magic being spread over the last few years, you should thank Mr Standish.”

Clive shook his head.

“All of that work was based on materials given to me by the Church of Knowledge,” he said. “More precisely, they were given to Jason and I kind of stole them all.”

Clive’s expression became awkward.

“Then he took them back to another universe and I was given my own copies,” he admitted, his words coming out in a rush. Jillet laughed.

“Yes, Mr Standish. Do you truly think you came into possession of that material by accident? A book is worthless if no one can read what is inside. You took what were worthless scribbles on a page and turned them into knowledge. Then — and this is important — you shared that knowledge.”

“Eventually,” Clive grumbled.

Clive had been lured into researching astral magic used by the Builder cult following Jason’s seeming demise. This was when the enthusiastic researcher from a small Magic Society branch discovered how riddled the institution was with self-serving politics. He had thought the corruption of his local director to be an isolated incident, but the self-serving behaviour and lack of ethics proved to be an unfortunate standard.

With no influential background, Clive was kidnapped in all but name and exploited by a high-ranking official. It was only with the help of Belinda and a sympathetic fellow researcher that he made good his escape. His complaints lodged with the Adventure Society and Magic Society prompted little and no action respectively. He resigned from both his employment and membership in the Magic Society and publicly released all the work he had done while under the society's thumb.

It was only a matter of time before the Magic Society realised the treasure they had lost in Clive. They had been trying to lure him back ever since but he hadn’t come close to being tempted. He still pursued his research interests, using the Church of Knowledge to spread any fruit produced by his personal research. The clergy of Knowledge’s church were very nice to Clive.

“The point is,” Musin said, “that the messengers have magic that we do not. And they claim they can prevent the natural array from growing into a catastrophe that destroys what’s left of our city.”

“We can’t trust them, obviously,” Emir said. “The best you can hope for is to trust you know what they want and can predict them accordingly, and that is a dangerous game.”

“It is,” Musin agreed. “But we’re desperate and they know it. While we don’t know exactly what they want, we know they can’t get it for themselves and we can leverage that advantage. They need us. The next step is to learn more about what they want, or at least what they claim to want.”

“If we help them get whatever they’ve been after this whole time,” Carlos called out angrily, “then what was the point of fighting them in the first place? And how do we know that what they’re after isn’t even worse than the natural array exploding? What if they get us to turn the array into a volcano weapon they can take from city to city, wiping out our civilisation?”

“That’s... one potential scenario, I suppose,” Musin said. “I don’t think any of us believe that we should let the messengers get what they want. But the reality is, they have a want and we have a need. If we fail to stop the array from going completely out of control, Yaresh is gone and the whole region will be uninhabitable. Even if we evacuate the whole region, the volcano will bring desolation, blotting out the sky. So soon after the monster surge, it may even damage the still-fragile dimensional membrane, causing additional monster manifestations. Elementals of fire, ash and magma in almost monster surge numbers, roaming out to spread the desolation even further.”

“No one is suggesting we do nothing,” Emir said. “But we’re talking about a vicious and cruel enemy who will sacrifice her forces to hurt ours even worse. They lost a diamond-ranker attacking this city and I’ve seen no indication she even cares.”

“Actually,” Musin said, “we believe the diamond-ranker’s death may have been one of Jes Fin Kaal’s intentions. Given the unusual nature of his death, she may have even arranged his assassination using the battle to hide it. We would need to know more of the event in question to confirm anything, but not all parties involved have proven willing to share.”

The room’s occupants once again turned their eyes to Jason, who looked up from the drink he was mixing, ingredients held floating in front of him by his aura.

“What?” he asked innocently. The director shook his head and continued.

“Messengers have their own politics, and the absence of a local diamond-rank messenger has left the Voice of the Will as the solitary authority. It’s possible that the entire attack was simply a messenger power play.”

“And you want to make a deal with someone willing to wage war on a city full of innocent people for only that,” Carlos said. “We have diamond-rankers and they don’t anymore. We should plunder their strongholds and steal their magic before a new diamond-ranker arrives to reinforce them.”

“An approach that has been discussed, certainly,” Musin said. “Discussed and rejected. We could eliminate the remaining messenger strongholds, yes, but the cost in adventurer lives would be prohibitive. We’ve lost enough, and there were compelling reasons that we never threw away the lives required to overrun the strongholds. You are free to try and convince lady Allayeth to change her mind, however. She would not be amongst the casualties.”

Carlos looked at the diamond-ranker, bowed his head and sat back in his chair, done.

“If I read this situation correctly,” Emir said to Musin, “your plan is to form an alliance with Jes Fin Kaal, who will absolutely betray us, and betray her better and first.”

“It’s not a good plan,” Musin confessed, “but days are desperate. In the end, we must do what we have always done: trust in adventurers to keep us safe. The people in this room represent power and knowledge in many fields. You are the best we can muster.”

“I can’t help but notice,” Jason said, “that natural array expertise is not one of those many fields. That strikes me as an odd omission, as does the absence of anyone from the Magic Society. The closest we have here are adventurers with Magic Society membership. No actual officials; no researchers. Not even a spokesperson functionary. Is there a problem with the Magic Society, director?”

It was not Musin but Jillet who answered.

“The natural array experts, as it turned out, were hiding the scope of the natural array problem. They told no one and continued their research until the city was attacked. After the attack, they warned us finally of the danger the array presents. In a final report left behind when they quietly departed the city.”

“The director of the Magical Society claimed he had no authority to force their return,” Musin said. “I requested new natural array experts, but that request is pending. The fact that I was told that by the Magic Society’s deputy director, due to the director’s sudden sabbatical, does not fill me with confidence.”

“Sounds about right,” Clive grumbled.

“It comes down to this,” Musin said. “Our options are to abandon and evacuate the entire region or make a dark bargain with the messengers and hope that we can outplay them when the time comes. We have the advantage of their inability to go anywhere near the array.”

“And they have the advantage of having the first idea of what’s actually happening,” Emir said. “I’m hearing nothing but bad ideas built on guesswork, assumption and a level of optimism I can only describe as ill-founded. We have months before this disaster, yes? Yareh is already little more than an ash heap and half the region’s towns are infested with

world-conquering parasites. Perhaps the time and resources currently earmarked for reconstruction would do more good preparing to contain the eruption of the natural array. Minimise the damage to this and the surrounding regions.”

The room got extremely tense, with the Yaresh residents filled with hostility towards Emir. This included Allayeth whose aura settled on Emir like concrete shoulder pads.

“This meeting,” she said in a voice so cold her breath almost fogged up, “is about saving this city. If you are unwilling to accept that as an absolute objective, Mr Bahadir, then we will thank you for the venue and thank you to leave the room while we continue discussing how to save our home.”

Emir threw his hands up in surrender.

“Alright,” he said. “I just think that any discussion should table every option, even if they’re dismissed out of hand.”

“Then consider your suggestion dismissed, Mr Bahadir,” Musin said. He then took a dimensional satchel slung over his shoulder and opened it, removing a cube covered in glowing runes.

“A table if you please, Mr Bahadir.”

A small cloud table rose in front of the director and he placed the cube down. He tapped at the runes in a complex sequence than involved turning the cube on its various sides. The glow faded, rune by rune until they had all dimmed. Musin opened one side of the cube and removed a slightly smaller but otherwise identical cube and repeated the sequence.

“Constance,” Jason said, “if there’s another Rubik’s babushka in there, I’m putting out a snack table. Is that okay?”

“Why are you asking her and not me?” Emir complained. Constance and Jason both looked at him and his expression wilted to a sulk.

There was no third cube but a blue sphere, twice the size of a fist.

“We’ve spoken about the messengers having magic more advanced than ours,” Musin said. “This is a messenger communication stone through which we can contact Jes Fin Kaal. As we cannot be sure if she can spy on us through this device, we had it under as much restriction as was remotely practical. But there is one more element that I have not raised. The messenger leader is only willing to continue discussion if Jason Asano is involved.”

“Is that because she wants a snack table as well?” Jason asked. “I need to find out about messenger cuisine, although I’m not optimistic. I’m picturing a lot of bran.”