Chapter 128

Dexter spoke as calm and controlled as ever, “The leaders of your respective units have been briefed.  We also have one hundred and seven operatives from the Magus Arcanum in the upper city to act as eyes and ears.  They will be working to immobilize the men and women we are certain, or suspect are under the aboleth’s influence.  Some of these people are officials, so the city is going to be in some turmoil as we secure them.”

“What of the local police?” One of the vampyres asked haughtily.

Dexter looked patiently at the man, who was probably hundreds of years old, “Two of the targets are police captains.  There may be more in uniform, so we could not risk seeking their aide for fear of alerting the target. It will not be your concern as you will be fighting under the city.  The supporting operatives brought in by the Magus Arcanum will handle the police.”

Serina, the wolfkin, asked, “What if the aboleth floods the tunnels while we are down there?”

Dexter nodded, “We do believe that is its intention.  As you have been briefed, the goal is not to penetrate the tunnels but to draw its attention to you while we assault it from the rear with Archmage Rincewind’s team.”  Everyone turned to look at our group.  The Rakshasa grunted disapprovingly.  His ego did not like the fact that he was not recognized as one of the strongest beings in the room.

Rincewind stepped forward to end doubt, “Do not take this lightly.  Failure is not an option.  You are all here to protect your own interests, but it will require everyone to work together to extinguish this threat.”  Most people remained quiet, but I noticed a few nods.

The team leaders came together with Rincewind and talked for a good forty minutes.  During that time, I introduced myself to Artemis and Taramis.  The illusion mage seemed intrigued with me, “So you are a newly minted demon, fascinating!  And your creator sent you here to help?”

I figured going with a simple storyline would be easier, “Yes.  She sent me to Earth to grow my power.  Keeping the planet safe is just a side benefit.”

“Marvelous! If you have time after this, I would love to discuss the dynamics of a demon lord and its servant’s relationship,” he sounded intrigued.

Jade came and stood next to me but turned and started talking with Lezerath to review some of the defense exercises she had practiced with her. I was not sure why Jade had come. She was the only catkin demi here. Maybe she felt the need to represent the catkin? The Rakshasa, Rajah Kystaliak, did not count toward their species even though he looked like a catkin.

Lord Del Roy approached our group, breaking from the isolated vampyres. He wore a toothy smile, “Lord Apollyon, I was hoping to meet you here!” He studied my companions. “You are lucky to have Apollyon on your team. He is an exceptional warrior and a true gentleman. I owe him my life and hope to repay that debt one day.” There were some surprised looks from my companions before Del Roy bowed, “Good hunting, Apollyon.”

Artemis asked, “I find it interesting that you consort with vampyres, Apollyon. Or should we call you Caleb?”

Artemis’ stern posture and way of stressing certain words reminded me of Spock from Star Trek. I replied, “I managed to myself in the middle of the vampyre civil war. Lord Del Roy was just lucky that he landed on my side. Still, I think from what I know of the vampyre I killed and Del Roy, Del Roy was the much better option.”

Artemis grimaced, “Back in the sixties and seventies on this planet, vampires were known to be feared and monsters of the night. I return to Earth, and now, with an extensive PR campaign over the last few decades, they are romanticized and adored.”

I laughed, thinking he was joking, “Are you talking about all the novels with sparkly skin vampyres?”

“Yes, you have read them? The entire premise is absolutely ludicrous if you ask me,” he stated firmly.

Jade, who had been half-listening in, walked over, “Almost as ludicrous as an incubus who helps people instead of just consuming their aether core to get stronger?”

Artemis raised an eyebrow and looked me over, “I can see your point, Pride Leader. Yet I am told this one is still young. I have dealt with lesser succubi on the higher layers before, and none were particularly helpful after they got you naked and immobilized.” He shook his head, “But I can see your point. What is the old saying, ‘Do not judge a book by its cover?’”

“Agreed,” Taramis added himself to the conversation. He looked over the group and decided, “If my illusion is broken during the fighting, I thought it best to reveal now that I am not human. Do not attack me out of fear.”

He looked at sternly Jade, who wisely retreated back to her group before he continued, “I am a lich.” I looked confused, so he explained, “I am an undead who has used powerful magic to maintain his grip on his continued existence. You know him as Rincewind, but back in the day, he was known as Nostradamus to me. He helped in my research for my quest for eternal life, and I am here to return the favor.”

Artemis seemed to step back, but I did not understand. We dealt openly with vampyres; what was the difference with an undead mage? I was more curious about his illusion, “Tamaris, your illusion is fantastic. I can not see through it with my enhanced sight. Could I ask how you do it?”

Tamaris smiled at my question, “It is an artificed sphere embedded in my stomach.” He chuckled, “Since I don’t have to eat, I thought it was the perfect place for it. It creates a powerful illusion that bends reality slightly. One of my greatest works. My own aether core powers it, so the illusion breaks if I run out of aether.”

“Marvelous! Can it obscure a person’s strength? Hide their aether core strength, I mean?” I asked, focusing on the mage.

He thought and nodded, “Yes, it could be altered to do such a thing. Are you requesting such a device for yourself, Apollyon?”

I considered and asked, “How large is it? Will it be affected by my shapechanging abilities?” I had read some literature on how my shape-change abilities work. Objects stored inside my body would not transition between forms well since my organs changed location.

“It is anchored to your aether core to draw power. I believe it should remain stable between all humanoid forms. I would be curious how my creation would work with your physiology demon. When I return after this adventure, I will endeavor to create a device for you. I just ask you to detail how it functions over time.”

“So you want me to be your research subject?” I joked. “That sounds fair. As long as it will not kill me?”

Tamaris chuckled darkly, “What is wrong? Do you not wish to join the ranks of undead?” He had a smile that seemed creepy now that I knew he was undead. It was like the smile was just for show and not to convey his true emotions.

Rincewind returned from his meeting. “I hope you all had some quality time together. We are leaving for Plymouth. Our entry to aboleth tunnels lies under an old estate up there.”

We followed Rincewind out while all eyes followed us. It kind of felt like we were the superhero team coming to save the world. I guess, in a way, we were. We entered a white utility van with decals on it indicating it was a handyman company called Husbands for Hire. All six of us were in the back with two rows of seats along the walls. Everyone except Achellion was dressed casually. Everyone was wearing the opal necklaces to help shield our minds.

Half an hour before the van stopped, the driver said, “I will let you know when the estate is clear.”

Rincewind explained, “We are trying to remain as secretive as possible. The aboleth will have mind connections to all the people on the estate. Two children, a maid, and the parents. The maid is actually an orog and does not leave the property, so once everyone has left, Tamaris and Achellen will handle her.”

Without word, Tamaris’ clothes changed to more of a combat rig. He had exchanged his clothes with his mind space onto his body, which was a neat trick I wanted to learn. Rincewind just sat in thought as others changed. Lezerath stripped naked and pulled things from a duffel bag to dress in combat gear. I averted my eyes out of respect. Archellon pulled weapon after weapon from his mind space as he geared up.

Artemis pulled a duster jacket, a belt with weapons, and a staff from his space. No one seemed to mind Lezerath changing inside the van. The different odors of the different races mingled as we prepared. I pulled my own combat equipment out. Two tetsubos, the Guardian aether pistol, my skinsuit, shield belt, and tactical suit. Changing was awkward in the confines as my head touched the roof. My trouble would have been humorous if it was anyone else but me.

I was halfway changed when Rincewind’s phone beeped. He announced, “They should be starting now in the city.” Thirty seconds later, his phone rang, and he confirmed it with a brief conversation with Dexter’s voice coming through the speaker. I think Rincewind looked nervous.

Our van driver turned, “The mother and children are leaving. The father is away already. Just the maid in the house now.” I finished dressing and tested my electro stun tetsubo and my shield belt with my aether. I checked the heavy aether pistol as well, but I had only fired it in my mind space.

I slipped into my mind space to find everyone assembled in the pedestal room.

Ten minutes later, Rincewind signaled for Tamaris and Achellion to go. They turned invisible and exited out the back of the van. The door closed, and we waited. A signal I did not see or hear, and Rincewind told the driver to pull into the driveway. After he parked, we all exited. We followed him inside to find a headless maid on the floor. She looked human, and I winced.

Tamaris appeared out of nowhere. “Is our demon squeamish?” he joked. “Let me…” he rolled the head out from behind the couch. A massive basketball-sized head of a lumpy orc remained. “The body still has her morphing charm on it somewhere,” he kicked the corpse lightly.

Rincewind was already heading into the basement. I made to catch up with him. At the bottom of the stairs, he suddenly stopped. “No, this is not good.” I looked around but did not see anything wrong. When everyone was assembled in the basement, he said, “There is an issue. The earth mage I sent to collapse the escape tunnels from this lair has gone silent. I am going to have to handle it myself, as he is likely dead.” There was some pain in his voice.

It was the first time Rincewind did not seem confident. He thought for a minute, “I will enter from the underwater access and, collapse the tunnel behind me and meet you in the central chamber.”

Lezerath angrily said, “That is foolish, mage. If the aboleth flees, you will have to fight him yourself.”

“We should send two people with you, Nostradamus. Lezerath and Achellion make the most sense. It gives both parties a fighter, a mage, and support,” Tamaris stated logically.

Rincewind nodded slowly, “Fine.” He quickly walked to a wall in the wine cellar and paused. The air’s aether density increased, and Rincewind reached for a nondescript brick and pushed hard till it clicked. The wall swung inwards and revealed a dimly lit passage. “We must hurry. You three wait here for twenty minutes so we can get closer to the other entrance before entering.” The man then turned and ran up the stairs. He was pretty athletic for being millennia old.

I realized that we were suddenly only three and about to attack a feared creature in its home. I wished I had left some type of goodbye message for my family, but Carrie had indicated I was going to survive this mess since I would have children in the future. I was having doubts now.

“Apolyon go,” Tamaris said, breaking me from my thoughts. Had it already been twenty minutes? I walked into the passage. The walls were concrete and not that old. Long LED lights lit the ceiling every ten paces as we reached the end of the tunnel. We now had ancient-looking steps descending in the darkness as the lights ended.

Artemis came forward and whispered, “The markings here indicate the Stone Masons built this. It was probably around the time of the Revolutionary War as a secret base.”

“You go first, Apollyon,” Tamaris said. “Be careful, the orog have excellent dark vision and close on their opponents with incredible speed. Just keep them off us and occupy them for a few seconds.”

I started to descend, gripping a tetsubo in each hand and listening intently for any sound. The walls started to show some water dribbling down them the further we descended. I thought I was being silent, and so a glow ahead. That, I assumed, was the end of the stair. I approached cautiously, and the chamber beyond had a blue, glowing moss—no, check that, the moss was emitting aether; it was not glowing.

The room was about fifty feet across and somewhat round. The walls were rough but smooth, and the floor had drains for the water reaching the room. A heavy door was on the far side. “Do you think it is a trap?” I whispered to my companions.

Silence as neither answered for a long moment. Artemis finally said, “I think this was the room the Stone Masons used. The door was added recently. The rock around it looks fresh.” He looked up, “The air vents in the ceiling are cemented shut, so they must have been leaking. I did not see any method to prevent our escape back up the stairs or to collapse the stairs as we descended. But I agree. It feels like a trap.”

Tamaris walked past me across the room, “If they plan to flood the chamber—well, I don’t breathe. When he was halfway the large door on the other side flung open. Huge muscular orcs rushed through.

“Fuck,” I swore, rushing forward to defend the lich. Six orogs entered the room in crude armor. They wielded wide-bladed swords. The mage disappeared as three orcs swung at his position.

I thought he had been killed, but he shouted from behind me, “Do your best to keep them occupied!” The bastard had teleported himself out of range—or maybe he sent an illusion forward. Whatever the case, I was on the front line fighting six orog by myself. I could see a seventh coming to join his friends. I spun away from a swing that impacted the stone floor and sent sparks and stones in a spray.

I lept over another swing and used my tetsubo to strike the nearest orog. This gave me leverage to move out of the reach of a third swing. I was definitely much faster than the massive humanoids. Their arms were the size of my legs, though, and if they connected, I was sure it was not going to be pleasant.

I charged my electro tetsubo and stuck one of the seven-foot monsters in the side of the hide. The force was strong enough to break the neck of the orog as well as my tetsubo. As that orog crumbled, a second orog burst into intense flames, and a third was flung into a wall. We were actually winning.

I went low on my next strike, aiming for a knee and dislocating the joint. The other two moved to circle me, and the seventh one was now coming from behind me. The burning orog was the only scream in the chamber as its flesh rapidly melted off its bones.

They succeeded in surrounding me, and soon, I was in a desperate struggle to block my broken tetsubo and parry with the good one. “A little help!” I yelled as the seconds dragged on.

“Sorry, you need to fend for yourself! We have more coming down the stairs. It was definitely a trap,” Tamairs yelled at me. I didn’t have time to look. Dropping the broken tetsubo, I pulled my Guardian Aether pistol and fired into the surprised face of an orog. A neat hole through its skull. I used the stunned body as a shield to get the remaining three in front of me. One was limping from the damage I had done to the knee. It also gave me a chance to see the others.

It looked like Artemis had erected an invisible wall at the bottom of the stairs, and Tamaris was burning the orog on the other side. I returned to my own problems. I fired into the chest of the nearest orog and burned a hole through its armor, but not deep enough to reach its heart.

I needed headshots to take them down. Seeing they had no hope of hitting me, the three orogs turned on the mages. I used the opportunity to swing hard in the back of one of the orog’s head. Breaking my other tetsubo but crushing the skull enough to fell the creature. “Incoming I yelled, not going to be able to stop both orogs as they charged.

I sprinted and tackled one from behind, driving it into the ground. My mass was not enough to hold it down as it started to rise immediately. I reached around its head and drove a finger into its eye for leverage. With my other hand, I positioned the aether pistol at the base of its neck and fired.

The foul-smelling oversized orc collapsed under me as I severed its spine. The one that got away was driving Tamaris into the wall. I heard bones crunch, and the orog stepped back to admire his work and turn on Artemis. Tamaris stood, unaffected by the body slam, “That was not very nice!” He said at the stunned orog, who was now the only one left alive.

I fired two shots from my aether pistol as Tamaris burned the humanoid from the inside out. I walked to the mages, and Tamaris’ body cracked as he walked, “That monster broke a good number of my bones. I will need a few minutes to repair the damage.”

Artemis said, “I think the aboleth knows we are here. What should we do?”

Tamaris voiced his vote, “We proceed as planned. I have not felt the mind of the aboleth yet, so it is not close.”

I thought to apologize, “I am sorry I let one get past me.”

Tamaris looked unconcerned, “Not a problem. You did about as well as could be expected,” he said as his bones cracked under his flesh to realign to their proper positions. A minute of this, and he nodded, “Close enough. I can heal the rest on the go. Apollyon if you would be so kind as to go first.”